

## **DANTE AND US: THE RECEPTION OF DANTE IN MODERN ANGLOAMERICAN CULTURE**

edited by *Dennis Looney,*  
*Daniela Fargione,*  
*Biancamaria Rizzardi*

COMITATO  
DIRETTIVO**Direttore responsabile**

Maria Teresa GIAVERI, Università di Torino, Emerita

**Direttori editoriali**

Giuliana FERRECCIO, Vicedirettore, Università di Torino

Federico BERTONI, Università di Bologna

Franca BRUERA, Università di Torino

Roberto GILODI, Università di Torino

Luigi MARFÈ, Università di Padova

Pier Giuseppe MONATERI, Università di Torino

Viorica PATEA, Universidad de Salamanca

Hubert ROLAND, Université Catholique de Louvain

Diego SAGLIA, Università di Parma

Kristupas SABOLIUS, Vilniaus Universitetas

Émilien SERMIER, Université de Lausanne

COMITATO  
SCIENTIFICO

Elena AGAZZI, Università di Bergamo

Ann BANFIELD, University of California, Berkeley

Alessandro BERTINETTO, Università di Torino

Jens BROCKMEIER, The American University of Paris

Laurence CAMPA, Université Paris Nanterre

Nadia CAPRIOGLIO, Università di Torino

Andrea CAROSSO, Università di Torino

Daniela CARPI, Università di Verona

Gaetano CHIURAZZI, Università di Torino

Enrico DE ANGELIS, Università di Pisa

Alexander ETKIND, European University Institute, Florence

Daniela FARGIONE, Università di Torino

Elio FRANZINI, Università di Milano

Massimo FUSILLO, Università dell'Aquila

John R. O. GERY, University of New Orleans

Carlo GINZBURG, Scuola Normale di Pisa/UCLA, Emerito

Sergio GIVONE, Università di Firenze

William MARX, Collège de France

Franco MARENCO, Università di Torino, Emerito

Manfred PFISTER, Freie Universität, Berlin

Peter READ, University of Kent

Marie-Laure RYAN, Independent Scholar

Chiara SIMONIGH, Università di Torino

Massimiliano TORTORA, Università di Roma "La Sapienza"

Federico VERCELLONE, Università di Torino

COMITATO DI  
REDAZIONE

Matteo BAFICO (Università di Torino), Raissa BARONI (Università di Torino), Anna BOCCUTI (Università di Torino), Rachele CINERARI (Università di Pisa), Davide GIANTI (Università di Torino), Alessandro GROSSO (Université Lumière Lyon 2), Michela LO FEUDO (Università di Napoli "Federico II"), Chiara LOMBARDI (Università di Torino), Maria Stella LOMI (Università di Torino), Alberto MARTINENGO (Università di Torino), Roberto MERLO (Università di Torino), Valentina MONATERI (Università di Torino), Benoit MONGINOT (Università di Torino), Daniela NELVA (Università di Torino), Francesca QUEY (Université Paris 7), Cristiano RAGNI (Università di Verona)

EDITORE

Università di Torino – Centro Studi "Arti della Modernità"  
c/o Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici,  
Via S. Ottavio 20, 10124 - Torino  
centroartidellamodernita.it

CONTATTI

sito web: [www.ojs.unito.it/index.php/CoSMO](http://www.ojs.unito.it/index.php/CoSMO)  
e-mail: [centrostudiartimodernita@gmail.com](mailto:centrostudiartimodernita@gmail.com)  
© 2012 Centro Studi "Arti della Modernità"  
**ISSN: 2281-6658**

# SOMMARIO

## DANTE AND US: THE RECEPTION OF DANTE IN MODERN ANGLOAMERICAN CULTURE

edited by Dennis Looney, Daniela Fargione and  
Biancamaria Rizzardi

- 5 DENNIS LOONEY  
**Giving Dante a Voice**  
*Introduction*

### FOCUS

- 19 COSETTA GAUDENZI  
**Dante, British Epic and Women's Education**  
*William Hayley's Eighteenth-Century Appropriation of the Commedia*
- 39 BIANCAMARIA RIZZARDI  
**Traces of Dante in Nineteenth Century English Poetry**  
*An Overview*
- 53 PAOLA SPINOZZI  
**Dante, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Their Verbal/Visual Personae**
- 67 GIOVANNI BASSI  
**A Turning Point**  
*Walter Pater's Dante*
- 95 RAFFAELLA ANTINUCCI  
**"I Am the Means and not the End"**  
*Dante and E. M. Forster*
- 113 MASSIMO BACIGALUPO  
**"What Dante Means to Me"**  
*Dante ed Eliot fra i modernisti americani*
- 123 ELISA FORTUNATO  
**A Divine Graphic Comedy**  
*Notes on the History of Dante's Adaptations in English*

- 133 MARCO FAZZINI  
**Delving 'Underground'**  
*Dante, Heaney and Their Companions*
- 147 ANTONELLA FRANCONI  
**Like a Medieval Journeyman with His Poem in His Hand**  
*Dante's Presence in Charles Wright's Poetry*
- 165 ERMINIA ARDISSINO  
**John Kinsella**  
*Una poesia dantesca in chiave ecologica*
- 181 HÉLIANE VENTURA  
**From Cocito to Avalon via Shaft Lake**  
*Collapsing Story Frames in 'Pictures of the Ice' by Alice Munro*
- 195 DANIELA FARGIONE  
**Mary Jo Bang's *Inferno***  
*A Missile for Capturing Dante's Future(s)*

## PERCORSI

- 213 FEDERICA COLUZZI  
**Dorothy L. Sayers and Feminist Archival Historiography in Dante Studies**  
*(Re)discovering Female Authorship in Fin de Siècle Britain*
- 231 OMBRETTA FRAU  
**Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore**  
*Valentine Giamatti's Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke College*

## LETTURE

- 251 GIAN MARIO ANSELMINI  
**Dante e le narrazioni**  
*A proposito di: CASADEI, MORACE, RUOZZI (eds.). 2021. Se tu segui tua stella, non puoi fallire. I grandi narratori raccontano il loro Dante. Milano: Rizzoli, pp.388.*

DENNIS LOONEY

**GIVING DANTE A VOICE***Introduction*

William Michael Harnett's *Still Life with Bust of Dante*

In the midst of Dante-mania, the most popular painter of still lifes in the United States in the nineteenth century, William Michael Harnett (1848-1892), created an ensemble in 1883 that calls attention to Dante.<sup>1</sup> Since Harnett is reported to have said of his art, “I endeavor to make the composition tell a story,” it behooves us to unravel the picture’s

<sup>1</sup> Housed in the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, originally called “Still Life with Helmet, Books, Trumpet, and Sheet Music” and now called simply “Still Life with Bust of Dante.”

narrative.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of a tumble of books, a brass horn commands the viewer's attention with its bell directing the gaze to the knight's helmet behind it, just off and slightly left of center. The helmet suggests that some of the unidentifiable books in the pile are chivalric romances, stories of courtly love, wildly popular with readers in the nineteenth century. Mark Twain wondered if the South lost the Civil War because it had read too much Sir Walter Scott, and had taken too seriously Scott's stories of chivalry and love.<sup>3</sup> There are other books and other objects in the mix here too.

Counterpoised to the helmet in the back, right of center is the top portion of a large bust of Dante crowned with laurel leaves. The poet's mouth, interestingly, is eclipsed in the picture. But even without the mouth, it is a recognizable image. From the late eighteenth century into the early twentieth, there was an extensive market for representations of Dante – statues, busts, medallions, as well as paintings, prints, engravings – large and small, durable and ephemeral, fine art and kitsch, bought by travelers on the Grand Tour across Europe. Harnett, an Irish immigrant who settled in New York City, catches that moment with this image. In Florence a tourist might seek out Dante's house, his church, and the very seat from which he supposedly caught sight of Beatrice. And after 1841, tourists could visit a recently-discovered image of the poet as a young man in his political prime around 1300 in the Cappella della Maddalena in the Bargello. Travelers from William Gladstone to Frederick Douglass took home replicas of Dante to commemorate their visits, which adorned their libraries.<sup>4</sup>

They also took home books, of course, and in this painting, in contrast to most of the still lives by Harnett,<sup>5</sup> we can make out the titles of two. One of the volumes is the image front left of a copy of Dante's *Commedia*, so well-read that the back cover, nearly ripped off, is literally hanging by a thread. Up close one reads on the spine in capital letters: DANTE / ALIGHIERI / ROMA / 1506. The poet's last name appears to have been difficult to paint on the book's spine and is smudged, whether intentionally or not is unclear. For the place of publication, perhaps the challenges of depicting too many letters convinced the painter to default to ROMA over what he may have intended to paint, FIRENZE, given that 1506 is the publication date of the important Florentine Giuntina,

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Robert Hughes, "A Reliable Bag of Tricks," *Time Magazine Online*, May 11, 1992: <<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,975465-1,00.html>> (accessed January 9, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See Scott Horton on Twain's take on Scott as spelled out in *Life on the Mississippi*: <<https://harpers.org/2007/07/how-walter-scott-started-the-american-civil-war/>> (accessed January 7, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> To be precise, Gladstone's family had a statue of the poet placed on the exterior wall of the library built in his honor in Hawarden, Wales. On Gladstone's cult of Dante, see Havelly 2014, 179-86; Havelly provides a helpful chronology of Dante in British culture with several pages devoted to the modernist period 284-98. On Douglass and the image of Dante in his private library, see Looney 2011, 62-63.

<sup>5</sup> "This is one of the unusual instances when Harnett actually depicted the titles of the books in his paintings. More typically, the texts appear as props for invoking a leisurely moment in a bachelor's private quarters." Martha M. Evans, *Claude Raguet Hirst: Transforming the American Still Life* 95, note 122. Also helpful is the essay by Judy L. Larson in *William M. Harnett*.

the edition by Filippo Giunta, edited by Girolamo Benivieni with a dialogue by Antonio Manetti on the topography and dimensions of hell. The famous 1506 Giuntina marked a deliberate attempt by Florentine cultural warriors to reclaim their poet after the success of the 1502 Venetian Aldine edition. If Florence couldn't have Dante's mortal remains, at least his city of birth could lay claim to the definitive text of his masterpiece.<sup>6</sup> That Harnett paints ROMA instead of FIRENZE probably shouldn't be overinterpreted; on some level it's certainly an artistic decision based on the realization that there is more space for the letters of one city's name than the other. But for onlookers attuned to the cultural debates in the Renaissance over Dante's reputation, there is a more subtle point to be had: no, not Rome, not Venice either, but Florence!

There is another juxtaposition in the heap of books to sort out. The other legible title is represented on the cover of a paper-bound volume positioned catty-corner on the edge of Dante's poem, upside down to the viewer. You can make out *Juliette*, which is the title of a scandalous novel by Marquis de Sade about the sexual education of a very young woman. *Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded*, is the novel for which Napoleon had Sade imprisoned for the final thirteen years of his life. One of a pair of novels, its counterpart, *Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised*, is the story of a proper young woman, Juliette's sister, who follows the rules and gets nowhere. Juliette, by contrast, once introduced to libertine pleasures in the convent where she was placed at a young age, never slows down. Even her encounter with the pope, whom she debates on the paradoxes of Catholicism in the age of Enlightenment, ends in an orgy. This structural pattern is consistent in the novel: the main character speaks at great length before launching into energetic sex, that is, extensive theorizing on libertine philosophy is followed by a display – to call it pornographic is no exaggeration – of the practice previously discussed. The ultimate point that Sade intended to make is that with vice you prosper in the economy that matters most, that of pleasure.

You would think that the juxtaposition of the two authors whose titles are on display in this painting wouldn't require much commentary: Dante and Marquis de Sade, the moralist versus the libertine. In *Inferno 5*, Dante the poet condemns adulterers like Paolo and Francesca to hell for their incontinence, for their lack of self-control, which is precisely what Marquis de Sade glories in. Dante emphasizes how reading about courtly love, symbolized by the knight's helmet in Harnett's composition, leads the lovers of *Inferno 5* to their death and damnation. Like Twain's Southern readers, they took chivalric romances way too seriously.

But there is more here. Like Juliette, not to mention Marquis de Sade himself, Dante too has some bones to pick with the Church. As readers know, he doesn't refrain from assigning clerics of all ranks to the appropriate section of hell for eternal damnation, not for lust, as it turns out, but for lack of control with money, for corruption, and for any

---

<sup>6</sup> For Florence's attempt at recouping the poet from Venetian culture, see <https://www3.nd.edu/~italnet/Dante/text/1506.florence.html>. Accessed January 7, 2022. For a detailed description of the edition, see Gilson, *Reading Dante in Renaissance Italy* 35-42.

number of other kinds of fraud. For speaking truth to power in this way, Dante was held up as a symbol of freedom by Italian nationalists and, through connections with them, similarly by Anglo-American abolitionists in the nineteenth century. Without too much effort one could find commonalities, surprising though they may be, between Dante's positions on the abuses of clerical authority and Sade's critique of the Church. It is difficult to determine the extent to which Harnett himself is attuned to these subtleties of interpretation. But his painting is certainly nuanced enough to allow interpretations on multiple levels that point to the polysemous quality of the reception of Dante. This still life attests to the ongoing engagement in the second half of the nineteenth century with Dante, both the political man and the poetic text of his big narrative poem.

Harnett painted dozens, if not hundreds, of still lifes, many with books on display, and the vast majority of those are copies with no titles. But one author's name is highlighted repeatedly and recurs in slightly different permutations – Dante Alighieri. In “Still Life with Tankard,” formerly in the Harriet and Mortimer Spiller Collection in Buffalo (auctioned in 1997 for a tidy \$827,500), the spine reads “Purgatorio / Divina Commedia.” In “Still Life with Flute, Vase, and Roman Lamp” (1885), in the Yale University Gallery, the painter also emphasizes Dante's second canticle but reverses the order: “Divina Commedia / Purgatorio.” A thorough inventory of Harnett's corpus would likely show other details worthy of comment. My point is that Harnett wanted his viewer to engage with Dante first and foremost, to put the poet in dialogue with other texts, to give him a voice, as it were. On the cusp of modernism, a painter of still lifes, arguably the best in America at the time, was striving to bring Dante to life. Harnett is representative of that moment in Anglo-American culture when Dante was coming into clearer focus. Modernism would move Dante from the back of the picture, as it were, to front and center and would give him a voice that would speak loud and clear to readers and to viewers of film and art inspired by the *Commedia*.

### From Harnett's Silent Dante to Modernism and Dante

Like Harnett, the readers, interpreters, translators, and artists, literary and graphic, who are discussed in the essays that make up this special issue of *CoSMO*, are devoted to Dante, and they seek to animate the medieval canonical poet, to give him a voice in their work, to find a place for him in their world. These essays contribute to the burgeoning scholarly work inspired by the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. And they do so within the unique purview of the journal itself with a sharp focus on how modernism and Dante join forces. Modernism + Dante is not a pairing that automatically comes to mind when one thinks about either of these topics in the context of their respective fields. If modernism signals a break with the past, how is it then that this canonical presence from the medieval period can figure so prominently in redefining, in reshaping, our perception and understanding of the modern? How can you make Dante new again? Here follow fourteen investigations that explore that question. The collection of essays is divided into

two sections, twelve essays with a special *Focus* on literary, critical, and historical examples on the reception of Dante in the modernist period with discussion of some key pre-modernist examples as well. The issue concludes with two bibliographical essays in *Percorsi*.

In “Dante, British Epic and Women’s Education. William Hayley’s Eighteenth-Century Appropriation of the *Commedia*,” Cosetta Gaudenzi takes us back in time to a pre-modernist moment where the focus on women’s education is strikingly modern, even ahead of its time. William Hayley’s poem, *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781), and his “Essay on Epic Poetry” (1782) make the case for the place and value of “female excellence” on the one hand and the *Commedia* as a legitimate literary model on the other. In six cantos of heroic couplets, Hayley’s *Triumphs* recounts the tale of Serena who is led by Sophrosyne on a heroic journey to hell, purgatory, and heaven. The goal of the journey is for the protagonist to learn and practice wise self-control, the definition of female excellence in this context; and the prize for achieving that goal is marriage to an appropriately wealthy and handsome suitor. Allusions to Dante’s quest abound in Hayley’s rewriting in the *Triumphs*. But it is in the “Essay on Epic Poetry,” where Hayley arguably makes his most significant contribution to the reception of Dante in the English-speaking world. After making a case for the epic qualities of Dante’s *Commedia*, Hayley provides a translation of *Inferno* 1-3 into English *terza rima*. His impressive metrical experimentation set the stage for greater poetry to come in Byron’s *Prophecy of Dante* (1821) and Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* (1822).

Biancamaria Rizzardi surveys the extensive impact of the Italian model in “Traces of Dante in Nineteenth Century English Poetry. An Overview.” As she notes at the beginning of her essay, it is a creative tradition that reaches back to the beginnings of modern English literature, to Chaucer, with memorable interventions by Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton, and continues full speed into the decades of modernism at its peak, with Joyce, Eliot, and Pound. In an early issue of *The Spectator*, in 1843, an anonymous reviewer of John Dayman’s translation of the *Inferno*, proclaimed Dante as a writer and stylist for Anglo-Saxon literary culture: “His manner is English: it is more direct, more concise, graver, than that of his countrymen in general...” By this time in the century, no reviewer had to convince any reader that Dante might be of possible interest as a literary figure. As Rizzardi reminds us, he had already been taken up by Byron, the Shelleys, Coleridge, and other Romantics, and he would be embraced by Tennyson, Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Victorians. An important feature of this essay is the focus on so-called female popularizers of Dante, women like Maria Francesca Rossetti, Anna Seward, Maria Christina Rossetti, Maria Oliphant, as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, acknowledging their work as precursors to that of women to come, such as Sylvia Plath and Louise Glück.

Paola Spinuzzi explores the links between the medieval Italian poet and one of his best-known namesakes, a poet and artist in his own right, in “Dante, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Their Verbal/Visual *Personae*.” Rossetti labored over translations of Dante, the Sicilian poets, and the poets of the Sweet New Style, who were Dante’s predecessors,

which he published in 1861: *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300). In the Original Metres together with Dante's Vita Nuova Translated by D. G. Rossetti*. Spinozzi juxtaposes Rossetti's literary project of translation with various artistic forays that contribute to the reception of Dante among the English public (e.g. *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice, Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*) to suggest that the philology of Rossetti's literary work is balanced by a precise, even philological, reconstruction of scene and symbol in his figural work. The dual nature of Dante's original text with the foregrounding of visual image in its literary art make Rossetti's two-fold reception, literary and graphic, a powerful example of responding to the original.

Giovanni Bassi, in "A Turning Point. Walter Pater's Dante," examines how Pater used Dante both in his critical writings and in his fiction to define his thinking about sense perception, artistic form, and cultural history. In Pater's essay, "Style," he "mentions Dante's concern with 'the glory of God' as a perfect example of the high moral purposes that should characterise great art." Pater's familiarity with Dante extends across the entire *Commedia* and also includes the *Vita nova* and other minor works such as the *Convivio*. In fact, he participated in the resurgence of attention on Dante the love poet, inspired by the uncovering in Florence's Bargello in 1840-1841 of the youthful portrait of Dante in his prime around 1300 – the image of Dante in love that became all the rage for tourists and scholars alike, the resounding emphasis of the New Life on the poet's reception. Bassi argues that Pater's Dante was the key to understanding how later artists in the Renaissance, e.g. Botticelli and Michelangelo, fused the realms of the physical and spiritual in their art. Dante's fusion of the material and the transcendent not only inspired them as artists but also subsequently became the foundation of Pater's aesthetics.

E. M. Forster, whose love for Italian culture shimmers across his works, not surprisingly engaged seriously with Dante. But he did so in a subtle way that has not been fully unappreciated till now. In the personal inventory of his library recorded in 1941, among the general sections of his collection ("modern poetry, ancient history, American novels"), one heading stands out, "Dante, and books about him." In "I am the means and not the end'. Dante and E. M. Forster," Raffaella Antinucci documents this lifelong fascination beginning with the early lecture delivered to the Working Men's College in 1907, on Dante as our modern contemporary. Forster's grasp of the totality of Dante's work is impressive as is the skill, pedagogical and oratorical, with which he introduces the audience to the author from three perspectives: that of the individual, that of the individual's relation to government, and that of the individual's attempt at knowing the Unknowable. In this way he frames his presentation of *New Life*, *Monarchia*, and the *Commedia* for an atypical class, an audience of working class men. There is much more to Forster's Dante, including the supernatural tale, "A Celestial Omnibus" (1911), in which Dante takes the reader on a hitchhiker's guide through the universe!

In "What Dante means to me'. Dante ed Eliot fra i modernisti americani," Massimo Bacigalupo takes his cue from Eliot's reflections at the age of sixty on what Dante had meant to him from his earliest work into the 1950s, when he gave the lecture whose title

marks this essay. Eliot was invited to address the Italian Institute of London on July 4, 1950, two years after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. He had been living with Dante, as he recounts for over forty years, first in translation and then in the original, on the page and in his memory. From the 1920s on, especially in the wake of the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 (with Pound's extensive revisions), Eliot's Dante became the canonical Dante for Anglo-American modernism. More than any other literary figure, Eliot introduced readers to Dante, from the disgust of infernal vice to the sublime visions of heavenly bliss. Bacigalupo points to the influence of Dante in shaping Eliot's work across his poetic corpus, in "Prufrock," "Gerontion," "Ash Wednesday," and *The Four Quartets*, in addition to *The Waste Land*. This essay reminds us that these poems are the building blocks of Anglo-American modernism, and, to paraphrase its title, confirms that Dante means much to modernism itself.

In "A Divine Graphic Comedy. Notes on the history of Dante's adaptations in English," Elisa Fortunato tracks the history of graphic novels inspired by Dante in the Anglo-American tradition. The critic pays particular attention to the impressive collaboration of Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders in their *Dante's Inferno* (2004) and to Seymour Chwast's graphic novel, *Dante's Divine Comedy* (2010), which up to this point is the only adaptation of Dante's poem into a book of poster design style. Fortunato situates the history of illustrated responses to Dante's visual and cinematic poem from its beginnings with the Codex Trivulziano 1080 (1337-1338), to Joshua Reynolds' depiction of *Count Ugolino and His Children in the Dungeon* from 1773, and on again to Robert Rauschenberg's transfer drawings of the *Commedia*, among others. Fortunato argues for the appropriateness of the graphic novel as a mixed hybrid genre that highlights the combination of word and image and as such it has much in common with Dante's poem itself. In more than one place the medieval poet writes a kind of graphic art into the narrative of his poem. And the critic wonders if the poem will find a renewed and extended life with a new generation of readers in this newfangled form.

Marco Fazzini explores the poetic resources Seamus Heaney has called on in the creation of his own voice with its strong local cultural accent and identity in "Delving 'Underground'. Dante, Heaney and their companions." To go underground, to descend into darkness, is to go into the Dark Wood of creation, which Heaney does, following David Jones, Geoffrey Hill, Norman MacCaig, among other poets, not to mention Dante himself. Fazzini takes the reader through various of Heaney's poems that depend on Dante at the micro level. And he reminds us that Heaney's three major volumes of poetry – *North*, *Station Island* and *Seeing Things* – recreate the canticles of Dante's *Commedia* on a macro level. Heaney's identity as a poet from Northern Ireland who had moved as a young man with his family to the Republic of Ireland created in him a sense of kinship with Dante through the perception of a mutual experience of exile. Though Heaney's displacement to the south was not exactly for political reasons on a par with Dante's actual exile, there is no question that there was a political element to it. His friend and fellow poet, Ciaran Carson, translated *Inferno* as a poem resonating with the Troubles of

Northern Ireland. And Heaney himself, as Fazzini points out, translated the Ugolino episode in a political key for prisoners.

Antonella Francini provides the definitive study of the American poet Charles Wright's lifelong devotion to Dante in "Like a medieval journeyman with his poem in his hand": *Dante's Presence in Charles Wright's Poetry*. Francini sketches out the early moments in Wright's adult life which led him to Sirmione on Lake Garda (he was stationed with the U.S. Army nearby in Verona in 1959) where he was inspired to become a poet. Publishing as recently as 2019, he has enjoyed a distinguished career as a professor of poetry; he was a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award; and he served as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Early on in his engagement with Italian literary culture, he set out to read each canto of the *Commedia* over a period of three months and he succeeded. Francini shows convincingly how that apprenticeship shaped Wright's poetry, which resonates with allusions and language taken from Dante, most especially from Dante's *Purgatory*. Dante's middle canticle especially attracts Wright as a source with its poetry of moral progression, of movement onward and upward, of hope and hopefulness. And from Dante, Wright hits upon a felicitous expression for one of his most Dantesque volumes, *The Southern Cross* (1981), whose title recalls the vision of that new constellation in the opening section of Dante's *Purgatory* 1.22-24, as well as signaling Wright's own origins in rural, religious Tennessee.

Erminia Ardissino's "John Kinsella. Una poesia dantesca in chiave ecologica," leads us into and across the work of Kinsella, the Australian poet who uses Dante as a literary guide across the culture and landscape of his native land. Three large poems, a trilogy composed over the last fifteen years, take their inspiration from Dante's *Commedia*: *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (2008); *On the Outskirts* (2017); and *Musical Dante* (2021). Kinsella's position as Professor of Literature and Sustainability at Curtin University in Western Australia signals the importance of the ecological humanities for his writing. Ardissino makes the convincing case that Kinsella takes from the Italian model not only a structure and specific allusions, not only form and content, but also an ethical tone that speaks truth to power, that in Kinsella's case speaks out for the rights of the transcendent landscape of his Western Australia. Kinsella's eco-activist voice resounds with accents drawn from a radical Dante. William Blake appears, as one might have reason to expect. But so does Louis Armstrong, who in the first part of the trilogy serves as guide (much as the musician leads Ellison's protagonist in the prologue to *Invisible Man*: "I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths."). In Kinsella's third part of the trilogy, appropriately named "Musical," a series of poems still in the works inspired primarily by Franz Liszt's *Dante Symphony* and *Dante Sonata*, we also hear Hildegard of Bingen and The Cure. But most of all we hear the Australian sounds of this committed poet.

In "From Cocito to Avalon Via Shaft Lake. Collapsing Story Frames in 'Pictures of the Ice' by Alice Munro," Héliane Ventura provides a close reading of the short story by Munro, first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January, 1990. Munro takes Dante's

infernal ninth circle as a primary source of inspiration for her story of religious betrayal, modeling her story's Canadian Shaft Lake on Cocytus, the frozen pit of hell in the ninth circle. In *Linden Hills*, Gloria Naylor similarly uses the bottom of hell as the point of reference for situating the most exclusive section of the suburban development for socially mobile African Americans in the novel. Munro explores Dante's ethics of treacherous fraud in the ninth circle with characters that are refracted through two other works, John Galt's *Bogle Corbet, or The Emigrants* (1831) and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), by James Hogg, who is, it turns out, a distant relative of the author. Echoes of Byron and Tennyson are heard in Munro's multidimensional imitation of the original source. And as is often the case, one imitation of Dante is filtered through another across time and space.

In "Mary Jo Bang's *Inferno*. A Missile for Capturing Dante's Future(s)," Daniela Fargione assesses Bang's version of the first canticle, which saw the light in 2012, in the context of: recent theories of translation; the venerable tradition of rendering Dante's poem into English; and the extraordinary qualities of Dante's poem itself (its multilingualism, its vivid realism, its openness to non-literary media, its emphasis on the reader's sensory participation in the text, and more), which entice and challenge the would-be translator. Fargione follows Edwin Gentzler's theory of post-translation studies that values the translator's version as an act of radical cultural subversion rather than a mere transposition of words from one linguistic side to another. One way Bang overturns the original is to replace it with contemporary references: John Coltrane, Amy Winehouse, Bob Dylan, Woody Allen, and the Addams Family. There are also references that, although more literary and high-cultural, are equally unexpected, such as Confucius, Shakespeare, Freud, T. S. Eliot, and Sylvia Plath. Fargione weighs the impact of the illustrations of Henrik Drescher on the reader's experience of the book as object and as multi-dimensional text. Drawings accompanying *Inferno 5* call to mind the *femme fatale* of popular cinematic culture and thus encourage the reader-viewer to imagine Semiramis, Helen, Cleopatra and the rest through the lens of Disney's Cruella de Ville from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, who is depicted in the margin with copulating cartoon dog-humans on a leash. Fargione's essay leaves open the question of whether or not Bang's translation works; rather, the scholar asks us to reexamine what we expect and need from a translation of Dante in the first place.

The special issue concludes with a section, *Percorsi*, which contains two essays that explore archives that shed light on the reception of Dante in the Anglo-American world. These important bibliographical essays remind us of the scholars who make up our extended reading community, past and present, and of the books whose interpretations form the bonds that link us to each other and previous readers.

In 1949, in the wake of Dorothy L. Sayers' translation of the *Inferno* in *terza rima* as one of the early Penguin Classics, Dante became an unexpected best-seller in postwar Britain. Her translation sold 50,000 copies in its first year on the market! To be sure, Sayers was preceded by women translators and commentators of the late Victorian

period who were regularly dismissed as mere *dantofili*, not full-fledged *dantisti*, but it was impossible to ignore the extraordinary success of Sayers. To wit, the eminent scholar Cesare Foligno found her work on Dante far superior to that of T. S. Eliot. In “Dorothy L. Sayers and Feminist Archival Historiography in Dante Studies. (Re)discovering Female Authorship in Fin de Siècle Britain,” Federica Coluzzi explores the Dante of Sayers and surveys the literary and historical context out of which it emerged. Pointing to several previous women who worked on Dante, she makes a convincing case for the growing legitimacy “of Victorian women’s scholarly professionalism in the expanding field of Dante studies.” Archives like the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College (Illinois), which houses the collection of Dorothy Sayers (initially curated by her friend and fellow Italianist scholar Barbara Reynolds), give voice to the scholars whose works they contain; they also enable those who follow, Coluzzi first among them, to spread the word.

Ombretta Frau takes the reader on a tour of the substantive collection of two hundred items devoted to Dante at the college in New England where she has had a distinguished teaching career: “American Dante. The Valentine Giamatti Collection at Mount Holyoke College.” As she acknowledges, Val Giamatti’s reputation has long since been eclipsed by that of his son A. Bartlett Giamatti, the noted Renaissance scholar who became president of Yale University, only to leave that illustrious position to become Commissioner of Major League Baseball, not to mention that of his grandson, the accomplished actor Paul Giamatti. But the elder Giamatti has left a valuable legacy for scholars of Dante that includes some of the rarest and most treasured early printed editions of the *Commedia*, such as the first Florentine edition by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna published in 1481 with illustrations after Sandro Botticelli. Frau describes the collection in helpful detail and shares as well the ways in which Giamatti acquired various volumes. Although Mount Holyoke College is a much smaller institution, its Dante collection holds its own among several other esteemed collections in Dante materials at American institutions of higher learning (Cornell University, Harvard University, University of Notre Dame, and University of Pennsylvania).

**REFERENCES**

- CACHEY, T. Jr, JORDAN, L.E., DUPONT, C.Y. *Renaissance Dante in Print, 1472-1629*. WWW Version of Exhibition at the Newberry Library.
- EVANS, M.M. 2004. *Claude Ragué Hirst: Transforming the American Still Life*. Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art.
- GILSON, S. 2018. *Reading Dante in Renaissance Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HAVELY, N. 2014. *Dante's British Publics: Readers and Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HORTON, S. 2007. "How Sir Walter Scott Started the American Civil War." *Harper's Magazine*. July 2007.
- HUGHES, R. 1992. "A Reliable Bag of Tricks," *Time Magazine Online*. May 11, 1992.
- LARSON, R. L. 1992. "Literary References in Harnett's Still-Life Paintings." In *William M. Harnett*, 26-75. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- LOONEY, D. 2011. *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- SADE, D.A.F. de. 1799. *L'Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice*.



# FOCUS





COSETTA GAUDENZI

# DANTE, BRITISH EPIC AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION

*William Hayley's Eighteenth-Century Appropriation of the Commedia*

**ABSTRACT:** In eighteenth-century Great Britain the *Divine Comedy* took an active part in literary discussions on genre (epic poetry) as well as on gender (women and education). To discuss this role, I will examine in particular William Hayley's *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781), a poem which draws on Dante's *Commedia* to produce for English literature a new kind of heroic poetry featuring "female excellence;" and his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1782), a scholarly essay which introduces the *Commedia* as an epic model and includes a translation of *Inferno* I-III in *terza rima*.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, *Divine Comedy*, William Hayley, *The Triumphs of Temper*, Epic poetry, Eighteenth-century British Culture, Translation.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is widely recognized as exerting a strong influence on English literature and culture<sup>1</sup>, though many would be surprised to learn that the average reader in Great Britain was quite unfamiliar with both Dante and his *Commedia* throughout most of the eighteenth century. The earliest attempts to translate the *Divine Comedy* into English start in the eighteenth century in conjunction with a gradual recognition of Dante as a canonical author (early 1800s): the partial renderings of Jonathan Richardson (1719), Thomas Gray (1737-40), Lord Carlisle (1772), William Hayley (1782), Charles Rogers (1782), William Parsons (1785), and Henry Constantine Jennings (1798); and the complete versions of Henry Boyd (1802) and Henry Francis Cary (1805-1814).

---

<sup>1</sup> Dante's *Divine Comedy* made its first appearance in Great Britain in the guise of a short imitation in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380-82). Chaucer also first paraphrased the Ugolino episode in the *Monk's Tale*. Since then, the *Commedia* has been appropriated by a considerable number of British poets: Edmund Spenser, John Milton, the Romantics, T.S. Eliot—to name only a few of those who have offered visions of Dante's poem in English. See "Nachleben" (Gagnolati et al. 2021).

For eighteenth-century British intellectuals the *Commedia* became a sort of object, a collector's item brought back from the Grand Tour<sup>2</sup>. It signified not only economic capital to acquire, possess, and trade (manuscripts of the *Commedia* and works of art which it inspired, including drawings, pictures and prints)<sup>3</sup>, but also cultural capital, a literary artifact to read, translate, discuss, and appropriate. The *Divine Comedy* could be used to represent, for instance, certain innovative tenets of an artist's belief-system: Jonathan Richardson the elder (1665-1745), in his wish to resist the dominant cultural agenda and raise the status of English painting, produced the first English translation of considerable length of the *Divine Comedy*, choosing the Ugolino episode because of its representation in a statue allegedly by Michelangelo<sup>4</sup>. Most importantly, the *Commedia* gradually became for British scholars a sort of literary capital comparable to a Greek or Latin classic and was circulated by them to reshape and subvert contemporary poetics. I will illustrate that in eighteenth-century Britain the *Divine Comedy* took an active part in literary discussions on genre (epic poetry) as well as on gender (women and education). To discuss this role, I will examine in particular William Hayley's *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781), a poem which draws on Dante's *Commedia* to produce for English literature a new kind of heroic poetry featuring "female excellence";

---

<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century the growing British interest in Italian literature and Dante was partly stimulated by the Grand Tour (Doughty 1950, 125). (By the early eighteenth-century antiquarianism had become a common pastime in Great Britain [Woolf 1992, 7]). Before departing Great Britain for Italy, tourists were advised to acquaint themselves with its language, and so some travelers began to read and study Italian literature. Once on site, tourists would visit such literary places as Dante's tomb in Ravenna or his tower of famine in Pisa. Returning to Great Britain, artists brought back not only ideas, but also books, drawings, pictures, prints, and statues.

<sup>3</sup> Dante was essentially 'rediscovered' in eighteenth-century Great Britain largely thanks to an Italian sculpture representing the Ugolino episode—allegedly by Michelangelo—which was brought to England in 1700 and inspired Jonathan Richardson to produce the *Commedia*'s first substantial version into English. Also, Italian manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy* played an important role in the recognition of Dante in eighteenth-century Great Britain. English travelers, among them Thomas Coke (1697-1759) and Anthony Askew (1722-1774), transported several copies to their country. The former purchased for the library at Holkham six manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy* in 1716-1718 (DEL 1909, I: 195). DEL is used in this article as an abbreviation of Toynbee's *Dante in English Literature*.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Essay on the Art of Criticism* (Richardson 1719), Richardson juxtaposed several renderings of the Ugolino episode: Giovanni Villani's *Florentine History* (where the story of Count Ugolino was thoroughly described in prose), poetry (his own translation of Dante's Ugolino episode), sculpture (the bas-relief of Ugolino brought to England in 1700 by the historical painter Henry Trench and attributed to Michelangelo but more probably by Pierino da Vinci), and a hypothetical painting. After this comparison of various media, Richardson maintained that there is a scale of arts which leads from history to poetry and then moves upward to sculpture and painting (*Works of Jonathan Richardson*, 187).

and his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1782), a scholarly essay which introduces the *Commedia* as an epic model and includes a translation of *Inferno* I-III in *terza rima*.

### *The Triumphs of Temper and the Commedia*

Hayley first dealt with the *Divine Comedy* in his most successful work, the poem *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781). Although today's critics hardly mention his works, Hayley was an influential literary critic and patron, and a popular poet for at least two or three decades. His *Triumphs of Temper* underwent twenty-four publications between 1781 and 1817, with American editions and a German translation. Due to his celebrity and the fact that he was a recognized poet (unlike previous translators of Dante), Hayley played a major role in the literary rediscovery of the Medieval poet in Great Britain and in the interpretation of his *Commedia*.

Hayley appropriated the *Commedia* to re-energize the British epic, a literary genre in decline in his day. Hayley opened his Preface to *The Triumphs of Temper* with an emphasis on what he saw as a common task of those who undertake poetry: "to raise, if possible, the dignity of a declining art, by making it as beneficial to Life and Manners as the limits of composition, and the character of modern times . . . allow" (iii). Hayley later acknowledged his desire to produce a new type of epic poem, moving somewhat away from previous English models of hero-comic works like Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), and partially embracing Italian epics like Ariosto's and Dante's<sup>5</sup>. Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* had used the high stature of classical epics to emphasize the triviality of a minor incident and satirize the lifestyle led by some people of his time. It owed its pathos, in part, to the unresolved ambivalence of its protagonist Belinda and her surrounding world, beautiful but with shallow values (Tinkler-Villani 1989, 79). In contrast, in *The Triumphs of Temper* Hayley portrayed a perfect heroine, Serena, who, after going through a journey similar to the one undertaken by Dante the pilgrim in the *Commedia*, learns to manage her temper and to reject artificial relations and trivial pleasures. Following the trend of many eighteenth-century fictions, Serena's excellence will in the end be rewarded with a wedding to a wealthy, handsome and beloved young man. From this perspective, Dante's poem brought two major contributions to British

---

<sup>5</sup> In his Preface Hayley wrote, "There is another point, in which I have also attempted to give this Poem an air of novelty: I mean, the manner of connecting the real and the visionary scenes, which compose it; by shifting these in alternate Cantos, I hoped to make familiar Incident and allegorical Picture afford a strong relief to each other, and keep the attention of the Reader alive, by an appearance particularly diversified. I wished, indeed (but I fear most ineffectually) for powers to unite some touches of the sportive wildness of Ariosto, and the more serious sublime painting of Dante, with some portion of the enchanting elegance, the refined imagination, and the moral graces of Pope" (ix).

culture: the visionary journey to three realms of the *Commedia* provided Hayley's *Triumphs of Temper* a setting where real and visionary worlds are connected in alternate cantos (respectively Canto I, II, IV VI, and Canto III and V)<sup>6</sup>; and it also supplied a useful narrative structure for presenting a female character moving toward a model of moral excellence. The former was more innovative in literary terms while the latter conformed to eighteenth-century patriarchy, but the two were nonetheless interdependent, as I show in the following paragraphs.

In eighteenth-century Great Britain, several literati discussed epic, its significance and the possibility of writing one in that age. Horace Walpole, for instance, who was opposed to epic, considered it "the art of being as long as possible in telling an uninteresting story . . . a mixture of history without truth, and of romance without imagination" (*DEL* 1909, 1: 339-40). Dante's *Commedia* became part of this debate, especially because of its hybrid and irregular form. In his *Essay upon the Epick Poetry of the Modern European Nations* (1727), Voltaire, whose work was very influential in eighteenth-century Great Britain, had criticized Dante and denied the status of epic poet to all Italian writers with the possible exceptions of Trissino and Tasso (*Dictionnaire philosophique* 38: 4; 39: 224-29; 40: 58-59). Dante was criticized in Great Britain not only for violating all acceptable standards of reason, decorum and taste, but also for deviating from the classical standards of epic poetry. An epic is traditionally a long narrative poem in dactylic hexameter, set in an age of heroes, characterized by unity of action and told in elevated style. The journey of Dante the pilgrim in the *Commedia* can be seen as an expansion of the classic *katabasis*, where the hero visits the realm of the dead. Although Homer's hero Odysseus does tell of his own otherworldly journey and encounter with the dead in the *Odyssey*, the religious pilgrim Dante transgresses Aristotle's precepts which forbid extensive participation of the narrator in the epic poem and progressive evolution of character<sup>7</sup>. Dante's emphasis on subjectivity transgressed Neoclassical rules, but at the same time appealed to emergent Romanticism.

The many objections to the epic format of the *Commedia* did not deter the attention and appreciation of British and Italian scholars like Joseph Warton and Giuseppe Baretti<sup>8</sup>. In his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756), Warton praised Dante for

<sup>6</sup> The *Commedia* was appropriated by Hayley as a vision. Such an interpretation of Dante's work was cherished in seventeenth-century Italy, where two of the three editions of the *Divine Comedy* were called *La visione* (1613, 1629).

<sup>7</sup> John Freccero has pointed out that the *Commedia*'s subjective narration recalls that of St. Augustine's *Confession* (1986, 1-28).

<sup>8</sup> Though we do not have many publications or critical studies of his poem in seventeenth-century Italy, Dante influenced many Italian epic works of the time in terms of citations and memorable images, and

his “sublimity” and “originality,” and characterized the *Commedia* as “a kind of satirical epic . . . which abounds in images and sentiments almost worthy of Homer.”<sup>9</sup> The Italian Baretti called Dante “one of our epic poets, who hath been always read and admired amongst us” (*DEL* 1909, 1: 257).

After moving to Great Britain in 1751, Baretti used Dante’s *Commedia* as an example to contradict Voltaire’s general criticism of Italian literature as feminine for an alleged lack of strength and virility. (At this time, Italian literary works were regarded by some as effeminate, also because Italian, as a language closely associated with music, was thought by many to belong to the woman’s sphere). In *A Dissertation Upon the Italian Poetry*, Baretti opposed this general attitude:

I have cited [and translated into English] these passages of Dante [the Ugolino episode], not only to give the English reader, who is not acquainted with him in the original, some idea of his poetry; but also, to show him that the Italian is falsely accused of *effeminacy* by Mr Voltaire, or rather by those from whom he has humbly copied this opinion. (emphasis mine, *DEL* 1909, 1: 262-63)

Baretti did not reject the Neoclassical dichotomy of masculine versus feminine literature, the latter located outside the legitimate realm of authorship<sup>10</sup>. Rather, he attempted to prove that Italian literature was effeminate neither in content nor form by citing examples from Dante’s work. Generally, the *Commedia* was seen as ‘feminine’ because of its emotional and irregular qualities. The Ugolino episode, a brutal story about the cruel death from hunger of a father, his male children and grandchildren, was thought by Baretti to have instead a rough and masculine character. Also, in Baretti’s opinion, Dante’s verses and language were masculine because their sound could seem “strong and sonorous” even to an audience which did not know Italian (*DEL* 1909, 1: 263). In conclusion, the Italian scholar extended this judgement to the rest of the *Inferno*, affirming that the thirty-four cantos of Dante’s *Hell* were composed “with more virility of thought and vigour of style than any other poem ancient or modern” (*DEL* 1909, 1: 263).

---

as a model for journeys to the Otherworld. See Marco Arnaudo, *Dante barocco. L’influenza della Divina Commedia su letteratura e cultura del Seicento italiano*.

<sup>9</sup> With the label “satire,” Warton especially referred to *Inferno*’s political invectives, grim humor and grotesqueness (*DEL* 1909, 1: 301-302). Many eighteenth-century critics, both Italian and British, saw the *Commedia* as a sort of satire. For instance, in *Dell’ipocrisia dei letterati* (1714), Giuseppe Maria Bianchini presented Dante as the first Italian satirist (Pietropaolo 1989, 282-318). And in *New Observations on Italy and Its Inhabitants* (1769), Thomas Nugent described the *Commedia* as “a downright satire on the government and its principal members, and a *caricatura* of the manners of his compatriots of both sexes” (*DEL* 1909, 1: 250).

<sup>10</sup> Laura Runge has written an exhaustive study on the use of the adjectives “masculine” and “feminine” in British literary criticism, pointing out that “gender is a constitutive element of eighteenth-century literary criticism” (1997, 3).

The general reading public in Britain, having no *Inferno* in English, would have to rely on Baretti's opinion.

While Baretti was valiantly trying to defend Italian literature and Dante in particular from the charge of being effeminate, the British literary world saw a revaluation of the feminine (but not of women).<sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton has directed our attention to the "feminization of discourse" in eighteenth-century novels, which featured women as main characters and attracted a large female reading audience (1982, 13). Also, Laura Rosenthal has pointed out that in the eighteenth century the concept of genius "changed from something one could have to something one could be" (1996, 19). In the Romantic period, the critic continues, "the emotional capacity expected of women could potentially signify genius in men" (*ibid.* 19). Following this wave, in 1795 William Roscoe recognized the adjective "feminine" as a positive quality to attribute to Dante. In his *Life of Lorenzo De Medici*, Roscoe quoted, with approval, Andres' characterization of Dante's *Commedia*, Petrarch's sonnets, and Boccaccio's *Decameron* as "three little books written for the purposes of satire, of gallantry, and of feminine amusement, [from which] we are to trace the origin of learning, and true taste in modern times" (*DEL* 1909, 1: 527). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Dante's *Commedia*, Italian culture and Italy itself began to be appropriated by the British Gothic as elements of melodramatic sentimentality and the *Divine Comedy* became a sort of new classic for Gothic literature, a source for those promoting a different kind of writing.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Triumphs of Temper*, Hayley connected Dante's *Commedia* with the genre and gender discourses of his time. The poem, as pointed out earlier, draws heavily from the visionary structure of the *Commedia* by featuring a female protagonist, Serena, who visits Hell, part of Purgatory and Paradise, accompanied by the fair Sophrosyne (who plays the role of Dante's Virgil in Hayley's poem)<sup>13</sup>. What is noteworthy is that Hayley the writer does not participate in the poem as a character as Dante did; he describes Serena objectively, thus erasing the prophetic layer of the *Commedia*. Also, and most importantly for this study, Hayley substitutes important male figures, Dante the pilgrim, Virgil and God, with females, Serena, Sophrosyne and a goddess. In his *Essay on Epic Poetry*, the British writer emphasized the need of having women as poets and as subjects

<sup>11</sup> Christine Battersby observes that although there was a revaluation of the emotional and the feminine in literature, women were still rewarded for being domesticated and obedient (1989, 82).

<sup>12</sup> See the use of the *Divine Comedy* in Gothic novels like William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Moreover, Italy provided a favorite geographical and historical background for many Gothic writers including Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe.

<sup>13</sup> Hayley represented only the last level of Purgatory, earthly Paradise, which is understandable given the fact that the British poet was a Protestant and Protestants did not embrace the idea of redemption during the afterlife.

of heroic literature (75), a literary *desideratum* which undoubtedly participated in the “feminization of discourse” in eighteenth-century literature mentioned earlier. However, I believe one should also consider another Dantean element, the story of Francesca, which undoubtedly influenced Hayley’s choice and description of his female character Serena, as is clear from *The Triumphs of Temper* itself and from the general interpretation of *Inferno V* by contemporary literati.

In eighteenth-century Great Britain the Francesca episode, Canto V, was mentioned and translated on more than one occasion.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Henry Constantine Jennings rendered Canto V and privately printed it together with a version of the Ugolino episode in 1794, and republished it in 1798 in *Cursory Remarks on Infancy and Education*. In his adaptation of Canto V, Jennings emphasized the pedagogical value of Dante’s historical cautionary tale.<sup>15</sup> The Francesca episode is, in many aspects, a retelling of the Fall of Man. In eighteenth-century Britain the Fall gave the primary religious explanation for a woman’s subordination to man (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 114). Francesca, who committed a mistake comparable to that of her foremother Eve, displayed a female weakness which could be cited to promote subordination of women in eighteenth-century society. In this sense, its translation by Jennings was undoubtedly welcomed by English patriarchy<sup>16</sup>. In a society influenced by Puritan values, sexual integrity and marriage were major requirements, and there was an increasing need for publications promoting proper conduct by women and the “regulation of desire” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987, 12). In addition, by providing in a footnote to his translation a fairly

---

<sup>14</sup> The first rendering of *Inferno V* appeared in prose in Thomas Warton’s *The History of English Poetry* (1774-81), and in poetry in the blank verse translation of the *Inferno* by Charles Rogers (1782). Thomas William Parsons published a Francesca version in heroic couplets in the *Florence Miscellany* (1785), Henry Boyd rendered a six-line stanza of it in his complete *Inferno* (1802), and Henry Constantine Jennings translated the passage in blank verse in 1794. In the early nineteenth century, several translations contributed to the renown of the Francesca episode: Nathaniel Howard’s (1807), Henry Francis Cary’s (1805), Joseph Humes’s blank verse renderings of Canto V (1812), James Henry Leigh Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini* (1816), and Lord Byron’s separate version (1820).

<sup>15</sup> In a footnote to his translation Jennings wrote, “*This melancholy event, in which Dante was nearly interested, from the protection given him, to the last, by the father of the lady [the Polenta family] (who was the most beautiful woman of her time), seems to be recorded by him, with the sole view of illustrating by actual, and then recent example, the dangerous practice of young people’s reading romances together in private.*” (emphasis, mine, 12)

<sup>16</sup> In his *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987*, Lawrence Stone has suggested that “patriarchy” may be too strong a word to describe the parent-child relationship in England in the early eighteenth century, meaning that not many parents of that time compelled their children to marry a particular person or imposed a veto without good reasons. Nevertheless, I prefer to follow Harth, who argues that, at least in terms of marital choice, “patriarchy” is an appropriate term for describing this period (1990, 54).



gender reversal: Dante's Francesca becomes a man, a change which in this particular case emphasizes the possibility of redemption for Serena who is now in the same position as Dante the pilgrim listening to Francesca.

This reference to the Francesca episode illustrates however that Hayley's imitation of the *Commedia* often remains at a superficial level and may be quite imprecise. Indeed, while Dante's *Inferno* becomes in Canto III a sort of fairy land and sometimes a parody of the horrors of Hell, in Canto V Dante's *Paradise* is eventually turned into a kind of burlesque, where the character Serena is portrayed praising the patience of those victimized women she meets in that location for having endured mistreatment from their husbands and fathers (e.g., "Whose patience weather'd all paternal storms" V.554). On the other hand, linguistically, Hayley often mirrors the *Commedia* in rather close detail.<sup>18</sup> For example, earlier in Canto V the fair Sophrosyne addresses Serena in terms which echo the Latin poet's remarks to the Italian: Hayley's "But fix thine eye attentive to the plain, / And mark the varying wonders of her reign" (V.195-196) is reminiscent of the imperatives of Dante's Virgil: "Mira colui con quella spada in mano" (*Inf.* IV.86), and "Guarda' mi disse 'le feroci Erine'" (*Inf.* IX.45).

To sum up, in *The Triumphs of Temper* Hayley's appropriation of Dante's *Commedia* happens at the levels of plot and protagonist. With heroic Serena, Hayley introduces an innovation to the traditional masculine world of epic found in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*<sup>19</sup>, proposing a new type of heroic poem which regarded "women's education" as invaluable for the formation of a British nation. While the *Triumphs of Temper* introduced Dante's *Commedia* to the British audience in an indirect way, through literary influences coming from a largely unknown writer,<sup>20</sup> Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry*, which translates part of the *Commedia*, bestows more attention on Dante the author and his work. In the following section, I will focus on Hayley's original and foreignizing *Essay on Epic Poetry* that included a translation of *Inferno* I-III.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hayley's language also recalls Pope's mock-heroic mode with its formal language and prosody, and the pseudo-Miltonic style, with its inversions and Latinisms (especially line 333).

<sup>19</sup> Carolyn Williams discusses Pope's conviction that Homer should be read as a guide to manliness: *Pope, Homer, and Manliness: Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Classical Learning* (1993).

<sup>20</sup> Tinkler-Villani has pointed out that Hayley's visionary appropriation of the *Commedia* in *The Triumphs of Temper* actually led British intellectuals like Anna Seward to be struck by the horrors of the real *Inferno* once she read it and by the egotism of its protagonist, Dante (1989, 93).

<sup>21</sup> After describing the translation process as a particular kind of rewriting, Lawrence Venuti identifies two interpretive categories helpful in studying prevailing patterns in the history of translation practice, namely "foreignizing" and "domesticating" (*The Translator's Invisibility* 1994, 43-98). "Foreignizing" designates a translation process which attempts to bring part of the source-text culture into the target culture by linguistic experimentalism or by the revival of marginalized literary forms of the target culture, which results in a contrast to the prevailing literary agenda. "Domestication," on the other hand, refers to

### Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry* and his Partial Translation of *Inferno*

In eighteenth-century Great Britain, the few epics which made it to the press were written by minor poets: Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695), *King Arthur* (1697), *Eliza* (1705) and *King Alfred* (1723); Richard Glover's *Leonidas* (1737), William Wilkie's *The Epigoniad* (1757), George Cockings' *War* (1781), James Ogden's *The Revolution* (1790) and John Ogilvie's *Britannia* (1801). Many contemporary epic poems rediscovered medieval England but generally met little success. More popular, instead, were epic translations, which were undertaken by well-known British writers and provided a more direct connection to the classical tradition, a major concern for the Neoclassical age. John Dryden's *Aeneid* (1693), Alexander Pope's *Iliad* (1715) and *Odyssey* (1726), and William Cowper's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1791) are among the most prominent examples of the several English versions which appropriated and domesticated the grandiose Roman and Greek cultures. Translation became such a common means of transferring the aura of past civilizations that in 1761 Macpherson forged one, the Gaelic epic *Fingal*, in order to overcome the lack of surviving ancient epic in Great Britain (*Beowulf* being the only outstanding remnant).

As the British literary scene gradually changed, more and more attention was paid to the Middle Ages, as part of a cultural self-discovery in the rising British nation. Italian literature also received attention, as part of a progressive rejection of Neoclassicism, and as a reconnection to Italian culture which had influenced two important periods of English literature, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. By the eighteenth century, even Dante's *Commedia* began to be considered an epic worthy of translation. After employing the *Divine Comedy* as a model for his new heroic poetry in *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781), William Hayley rehabilitated the medieval poem in his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1782) and translated part of it as an example of a remarkable epic.

Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry* is actually a verse commentary on the epic genre intended to encourage British writers to produce epic poems: "I wish to kindle in our Poets a warmer sense of national honor, with ambition to excel in the noblest province of poesy" (DEL 1909, 1: 363). In this essay, Hayley not only uses the *Commedia* as an epic model worthy of imitation, but he also revalues Dante himself as a writer to be

---

a process aimed at making the source-text intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader by avoiding the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of the source-text and thus conforming to the dominant literary canon of the target culture. Of course, in the last analysis, all translation is domestication because translation methods can never be free of "domestic" values. "In foreignizing translation, the difference of the foreign text can only ever be figured by domestic values that differ from those in dominance" (*ibid.*, 98). Despite this limitation, I employ Venuti's interpretive categories "domesticating" and "foreignizing" to discuss translation practice in the eighteenth century and to distinguish the various cultural functions of the *Commedia* renderings.

emulated. He exhorts British writers to become new Dantes who, like the medieval poet, will expand the matter and form of epic. In Hayley's opinion, the new epic should include satire, religion, and romantic love. As pointed out earlier in this article, participating in the "feminization of discourse" of his century and possibly influenced by the courtly tradition of medieval romance, Hayley thinks that women, not only men, should be epic's major protagonists; that its form should be various and include different stanza patterns, meters, and rhymes; and finally, that its main purpose should be didactic: "That verse shou'd ever rise on Virtue's base, / And every master of this matchless art / Exalt the Spirit, and improve the Heart" (78). To support his radical proposals, Hayley translated parts of Dante's *Inferno* and Ercilla's *La Araucana*, though he oddly placed them in the lengthy notes to Epistle III.

Hayley's rendering of the first three canti of *Inferno* was the first published English translation of more than one episode of the *Commedia*. It not only broke new ground, but also contributed significantly to Dante's reception in Great Britain as a daring writer and as a poet of Hell. Hayley's version of Dante was recognized and discussed by contemporary scholars, including John Duncombe, John Hoole, Anna Seward, Samuel Henley, Robert Southey and Leigh Hunt.<sup>22</sup> Henley regretted that Hayley had not translated the whole *Inferno* (DEL 1909, 1: 439), and Southey affirmed that a "greater effect was produced upon the rising generation of scholars by the Notes to his *Essay on Epic Poetry*, than by any other contemporary work, the Relics of Ancient Poetry alone excepted" (*ibid.*, 283).

Hayley's rendering of *Inferno* I-III was preceded by an assessment of Dante's life. Lives of Dante were being written with more frequency towards the end of the eighteenth century. This trend counteracted the previous English ploy of "stealing" from Dante without acknowledging his name.<sup>23</sup> Like other accounts of Dante's life, Hayley's described the medieval poet as an historical figure who was "unjustly persecuted by those of his own faction" and forced to wander Italy as an exile (23-24). Unlike other contemporary discussions of the *Commedia*, however, Hayley's attempted to provide a full and balanced literary perspective on the medieval poem and reproduced previous literary criticism of Dante's work written by Boccaccio, Voltaire and the Wartons.

Because of Hayley's interest in the epic design of the *Commedia*, the British poet avoided translating episodes from it, unlike most of his predecessors, and he also rejected

---

<sup>22</sup> Although Duncombe thought Hayley's *Commedia* would never become popular because "the measure of the original is not adapted to our language," he was generally favorable and called it "faithful to the sense and spirit of the original" (DEL 1909, 1: 379). Hoole emphasized the "wonderful spirit and fidelity" of Hayley's translation (*ibid.*, 388). Seward called it a "sublime English version" (*ibid.*, 396).

<sup>23</sup> In *Volpone*, Ben Jonson had mentioned that Dante was among the several Italian writers from whom the British "deign to steal" (DEL 1909, 1: 109).

the elitist Neoclassical translation practice of *les belles infidèles*, which translated what was considered the best from a writer's work (primarily the Ugolino and Francesca episodes).<sup>24</sup> Instead, he showed his concern for the grand epic design of the entire *Divine Comedy* by adhering to its structure and by translating from its beginning.

The length of Hayley's version and the original text on the opposite page suggest that he was perhaps intending to undertake a complete translation. In the introduction to his version, Hayley actually hints at such a project:

We have several versions of the celebrated story of Ugolino; but I believe no entire Canto of Dante has hitherto appeared in our language, though his whole work has been translated into French, Spanish, and Latin verse. The three Cantos which follow, were translated a few years ago, to oblige a particular friend. The Author has since been solicited to execute an entire translation of Dante; but *the extreme inequality of this Poet* would render such a work a very laborious undertaking, and it appears very doubtful how far such a version would interest our country. Perhaps the reception of these Cantos may discover to the Translator the sentiments of the public. (emphasis mine, 31-32)

Hayley is rather cautious with such a controversial subject as Dante and grounds his desire to translate the *Commedia* on external factors. The writer rendered *Inferno* I-III to please "a particular friend," and then published his translation to rescue Great Britain from its provinciality, as neighboring France and Spain already possessed versions of the entire *Commedia*. Although others reportedly asked Hayley to render Dante's poem, the translator hesitates because of the great difficulties posed by its irregular, inconsistent style. The poet then describes his translation as a sample which he would have continued if met with positive reactions from the reading public. (Since Hayley's attempt received insufficient encouragement, the writer abandoned the partially-formed project of translating the whole poem, and we have only its first three cantos.) Just as in *The Triumphs of Temper*, Hayley here shows himself to be both a Neoclassical and a Pre-romantic writer.<sup>25</sup> On one side, Hayley is a Neoclassical scholar who has reservations about the *Commedia* because he sees in it an inconsistent style. On the other side, the translator appears to be an innovative Pre-romantic interested in changing the status of Dante's *Commedia* provided that the reading public concurs, which implies that aesthetic judgement and authority rely principally on the audience.

Although Hayley conditions his rendering on exterior factors, his rather literal translation and his rejection of the *belles infidèles* Neoclassical translating practice tell us that he was at least beginning to consider Dante and his work as authoritative. In the

<sup>24</sup> For a description of eighteenth-century translating techniques, see "The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Baker 2021, 339-341).

<sup>25</sup> Tinkler-Villani discusses Hayley's Neoclassicism and Pre-romanticism in relation to *The Triumphs of Temper* (1989, 78).

following paragraphs, I draw attention to important aspects of Hayley's translation and connect them with the British eighteenth-century rediscovery of Dante. Hayley's translation is a quite literal rendition of the *Commedia* as revealed by the comparable number of lines, by the similar rhyming pattern, and by few semantic deviations. In the following analysis, I focus not so much on the precision of Hayley's translation as on some of its distortions because they provide valuable insight into the translator's appropriation of Dante's poetry. Here are Hayley's opening lines:

In the mid season of this *mortal strife*, 1  
 I found myself within a gloomy grove,  
*Far wandering from the ways of perfect life;*  
 The place I know not, where I chanc'd to rove,  
 It was a wood so wild, it wounds me sore  
 But to remember with what ills I strove:  
 Such still my dread, that death is little more.  
 But I will tell the good which there I found.  
 High things 't was there my fortune to explore:  
 Yet how I enter'd on that secret ground 10  
 I know not to explain; so much in sleep  
 My mortal senses at that hour were drown'd.  
 But when I reached the bottom of a steep,  
 That rose to terminate the *dreary vale*,  
 Which made *cold terrors* thro' my bosom creep,  
 (emphasis mine, *Essay on Epic Poetry* 1782, 33-35)

In the first line, Hayley translates Dante's "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" with "In the mid season of this mortal strife." Whereas Dante began with the imagery of life as a journey ("cammin di . . . vita"), Hayley emphasizes the temporary and toilsome nature of human life ("season of . . . mortal strife"). Hayley's revision "mortal strife" yields a more negative sense than Dante's, adding a graveyard reminder to the reader that death is inevitable. Later, Hayley's translation acquires a Gothic coloring which will become more pronounced and consistent in Canto III, where Dante describes the damned souls and hell itself.

We can learn much by studying Hayley's adjectival expansions, a typical Neoclassical device drawing on the poetry of Spenser and sometimes related to metrical padding. Here in Canto I, among Hayley's many adjectival expansions are some expressing terror, horror and dread. For instance, in the opening lines, Hayley's phrases "dreary vale" and "cold terrors" translate respectively the bare nouns "valle" and "paura" (*Inf.* I.14-15). Some verses later, Dante's "con la test'alta e con rabbiosa fame" (*Inf.* I.46-47) becomes "with open jaws, a thirst for human gore." The addition "human gore" and the variation "open jaws" make of the *Commedia* a sensational work producing a frisson similar to that of contemporary Gothic.

Tinkler-Villani has suggested that in Hayley's version Dante becomes something like the main character of a Gothic novel, since certain features of the translation seem to emphasize "the protagonist's sensibility," that is, the hero's emotional state (1989, 96). Following the path of *The Triumphs of Temper*, in his translation of *Inferno* I-III Hayley endows Dante the protagonist with feminine traits.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Hayley describes Dante as "blushing," a behavior characteristically attributed to females in eighteenth-century literature: "I answer'd, blushing at his kind account" translates Dante's "rispuos'io lui con vergognosa fronte" (*Inf.* I.81). Most importantly, Hayley's Dante is a character who, like the protagonists of eighteenth-century novels, undergoes a journey of education but not of purification. Hayley depicts Dante as a character without moral blemish. For instance, Dante's "ne lagrimar," which shows his initial tearful pity for the infernal sinners, is rendered by Hayley with "my fears arose," a more self-centered reaction, but one which does not potentially question divine justice (*Inf.* III.24).

Hayley's domestication of Dante's *Inferno* seems to involve not only moral, but also religious dimensions. The British poet appears to bestow a Protestant censure upon Dante's *Inferno* I-III by lessening the role played by Mary, the Mother of God.

A gentle spirit (Lucia is her name)  
 In heaven laments the hardships of my friend,  
 For whom I ask your aid: to me she came,  
 And kindly bade me to his woes attend:  
 Behold (she said) thy servant in distress!  
 And I his safety to thy care commend.  
 (*Hell.* II.94-99)

Donna è gentil nel ciel che si compianghe  
 di questo 'mpedimento, ov'io ti mando,  
 sì che duro giudicio là su frange.  
 Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando,  
 e disse: "Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele  
 di te, ed io a te lo raccomando."  
 (*Inf.* II.94-99)

In Dante's poem, Beatrice explains to Virgil that she has been sent on this errand by Lucia, who, in her turn, has been summoned by a third "Donna . . . gentil," recognized by critics as Maria. In Hayley's version, however, Lucia and Beatrice are the only women

---

<sup>26</sup> The attribution of feminine traits to a male protagonist is a phenomenon which can also be noted in contemporary British literature. In Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey, through France and Italy* (1768), the protagonist and narrator of the journey, Parson Yorick, is a man of sensibility who is frequently moved to tears.



Behind it, driven by Fate's supreme command,  
 Came such a host! I ne'er could have believ'd  
 Death had collected so complete a band.  
 When now I had the forms of all perceiv'd,  
 I saw the shade of that *ignoble priest*,  
 Of sovereign power by indolence bereav'd.                    60  
 (emphasis mine, *Inf.* III.43-60)

The *terza rima* is a three-lined stanza with a continuous rhyming pattern ABA, BCB, CDC etc. Although Hayley managed to reproduce Dante's *terza rima*, he chose not to imitate the Italian poet's hendecasyllabic line, opting instead for the iambic pentameter, a more native English rhythm. The pattern of hendecasyllables is more difficult to reproduce in English than in Italian, as Romance languages more naturally employ syllabic meters, while Germanic languages incline toward accentual rhythms. Another difficulty which faced Hayley was the fact that Italian is richer in rhymes than English. For this reason, Hayley's translation became not merely a replication of Dante's poem but an invention in the sense discussed by Barbara Folkart ("Modes of Writing: Translation as Replication or Invention" 1993, 5: xv-xxii). In order to render the *Inferno* in *terza rima*, the translator had to forge a new form of English meter. Hayley succeeded in employing the *terza rima* and maintained some of Dante's rhythm through the use of the English iambic pentameter and three additional literary devices: Latinisms, alliteration, and padding. Hayley's Latinisms sometimes enabled him to rhyme the verses (e.g., "grate" and "fate" in the preceding passage). His use of alliteration (e.g., "s" in line 59 assisted in reproducing the sound of Dante's text (alliterations are typical of Dante but also of the traditional British epic, see *Beowulf*). Finally, Hayley's padding helped to maintain his iambic pentameter. Of course, Hayley's expansions added various connotations to Dante's text, as demonstrated by the Gothic coloring of the adjectives which I have underlined in the passage above: "grievous," "scornful," "troubled" and "ignoble."

We can regard Hayley's decision to translate *Inferno* I-III in *terza rima* as innovative and foreignizing, a radical departure from translating epic in heroic couplets, the habit of the first half of the eighteenth century (Pope's Homer), or from rendering it in blank verse, the practice of the second half of the eighteenth century (Cowper's Homer). Hayley's literal translation practice is consistent with his theoretical stance in the *Essay on Epic Poetry*, where he encourages British poets to imitate Dante as an epic poet. By attempting a rhyme relatively new to English in translating *Inferno* I-III in *terza rima*, Hayley showed not only a deep concern for the source text, but also a radical intention to introduce innovation into English poetry. Although Geoffrey Chaucer, Samuel Daniel, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard Surrey had already tried the *terza rima*, and Milton had used it in one of his Psalm translations, this verse form was

employed only infrequently by British poets. Hayley's translation enhanced its status in English. Thereafter, Lord Byron translated part of *Inferno V* in *terza rima* (1820), and also composed *The Prophecy of Dante* (1821) in the same pattern.<sup>27</sup> Also, in this period Shelley used *terza rima* in *The Triumph of Life* (1822).

Finally, Hayley's undertaking was noteworthy because, even without being fully aware of it, the translator contributed to a more correct interpretation of Dante's text. As Freccero has pointed out, the *terza rima* has a significance in the *Divine Comedy* beyond a simple representation of the trinity (1986 258-71). The forward movement of the *terza rima* mirrors a similar movement which Freccero sees at every level, semantic and formal, of the *Commedia*, including its *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. After the quite loose literary appropriation of *The Triumphs of Temper*, Hayley's translation of the *Divine Comedy* shows that the study of Dante's poem was advancing, and that increasing attention was being given to poetics rather than facts and narration. In the last analysis, Hayley's work was an important basis for recognition of Dante as author by British Romantics, and illustrates that acknowledgement of a foreign writer occurs in a target culture by means of both foreignizing and domesticating forces satisfying a need for literary change while partially supporting the *status quo*.

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Prophecy of Dante* was written in 1819 but not published until 1821.

**REFERENCES**

- ALIGHIERI, D. 1939. *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. by J. D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ARMSTRONG, N., TENNENHOUSE, L. 1987. *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature. And the History of Sexuality*. New York and London: Methuen.
- ARNAUDO, M. 2013. *Dante barocco. L'influenza della Divina Commedia su letteratura e cultura del Seicento italiano*. Ravenna: Angelo Longo Editore.
- BAKER, M. 2021. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn. London and New York: Routledge.
- BARNARD, T. (ed.). *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- BASSNETT, S., LEFEVERE, A. 1998. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Clevedon, Philadelphia, Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- BASSNETT, S., TRIVEDI, H. 1999. *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- BATTERSBY, C. 1989. *Gender and Genius: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- BECKFORD, W. 1983 [1786]. *Vathek*. Ed. Roger Lonsdale. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BOYD, H. 1785. *A Translation of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri in English Verse with Historical Notes and the Life of Dante*. London: C. Dilly.
- BURNEY, C. 1974 [1770]. *Music, Men, and Manners in France and Italy*, ed. by H. E. Poole. London: Eulenburg Books.
- BYRON, G.G.N. 1980. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by J. J. McGann. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- CARY, H. F. 1910 [1844]. *The Vision or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri: With 109 Illustrations by John Flaxman*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edn. London: Henry Frowde Oxford University Press.
- CAVUOTO, D. 1986. "Tra mille abissi e precipizi: The Contribution of Algarotti, Bettinelli and Gozzi to Dante's Critical Fortune in the Eighteenth Century." *Spunti e Ricerche: Rivista di Italianistica* 2: 66-90.
- CLIFFORD, J. 1993. "On Collecting Art and Culture." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by S. During, 49-73. London and New York: Routledge.
- COLLISON-MORLEY, L. 1909. *Giuseppe Baretti: With an Account of His Literary Friendships and Feuds in Italy and in England in the Days of Dr. Johnson*. London: John Murray.
- CREASY, W. C. 1980. "The Shifting Landscape of Hell." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11: 40-65.
- DAVIDOFF, L., HALL, C. 1987. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- DE BRUYN, F. 2021. *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- DE SUA, W.J. 1964. *Dante into English: A study of the translation of the Divine Comedy in Britain and America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- DOUGHTY, O. 1950. "Dante and the English Romantic Poets." In M. Praz (ed.). *English Miscellany*, 125-69. Roma: Edizioni di "Storia e letteratura."
- EAGLETON, T. 1982. *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- ELLIS, S. 1983. *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T.S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- FERRANTE, J. 1993. "A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by R. Jacoff, 153-71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FOLKART, B. 1993. "Modes of Writing: Translation as Replication or Invention." *Romance Languages Annual 5*: xv-xxii.
- FRECCERO, J. 1986. *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge: The Harvard University Press.
- GENTZLER, E. 2016. *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- GRAGNOLATI, M., LOMBARDI, E., SOUTHERDEN, F. 2021. *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HAYLEY, W. 1781. *The Triumphs of Temper: A Poem in Six Cantos and Other Works*. London: J. Dodsley.
- . 1782. *An Essay on Epic Poetry in Five Epistles to the Rev. Mr Mason with Notes*. London: J. Dodsley.
- JENNINGS, C.H. 1794. *Cursory Remarks on Enfancy and Education with Other Tracts*. London: the author.
- LEFEVERE, A. 2016 [1992]. *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992). New York: Routledge.
- MATCHINSKE, M. 1998. *Writing, Gender and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- MATURIN, C. 1989 [1820]. *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. by D. Grant and C. Baldick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- PIETROPAOLO, D. 1989. *Dante Studies in the Age of Vico*. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions.
- REYNOLDS, Sir J. 1975 [1959]. *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- RICHARDSON, J. 1792. *The Works of Jonathan Richardson*, ed. by Anonymous. Strawberry Hill: B. White and Son; T. and J. Egerton; J. Debrett; R. Faulder; W. Miller; J. Cuthell; J. Barker; E. Jeffery.
- ROSENTHAL, L.J. 1996. *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Propriety*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- ROSS, M.B. 1994. "Authority and Authenticity: Scribbling Authors and the Genius of Print in Eighteenth-Century England." In *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in law and Literature*, ed. by M. Woodmansee and P. Jaszi, 231-57. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- RUNGE, L.L. 1997. *Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism 1660-1790*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STONE, L. 1990. *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SUSSMAN, C. 2013. *Eighteenth-Century Literature: 1660-1789*. New York: Routledge.
- TINKLER-VILLANI, V. 1989. *Visions of Dante in English Poetry: Translations of the Commedia from Jonathan Richardson to William Blake*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- . 1991. "Translation as a Metaphor for Salvation: Eighteenth-Century English Versions of Dante's *Commedia*." *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 1: 92-101.
- TOURY, G. 1995. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- TOYNBEE, P. 1906. "English Translations of Dante's Works." *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres de Bordeaux et des Universités du Midi* 4: 285-288.
- . 1909. *Dante in English Literature: From Chaucer to Cary*, 2 vols. London: Methuen.
- . 1921. *Dante Studies*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- . 1921. *Britain's Tribute to Dante in Literature and Art: A Chronological Record of 540 Years (c. 1380-1920)*. London: Oxford University Press.

- VILLANI, G. 1823 [1537]. *Cronica di Giovanni Villani a miglior lezione ridotta coll'aiuto de' testi a penna*, ed. by I. Moutier. Firenze: Magheri.
- VENUTI, L. 2017 [1995]. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. New York: Routledge.
- WALLACE, D. 1993. "Dante in English." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by R. Jacoff, 237-258. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WILLIAMS, C.D. 1993. *Pope, Homer, and Manliness: Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Classical Learning*. London and New York: Routledge.
- WOLLSTONECRAFT, M. 2009 [1792]. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- WOOLF, D.R. 1992. "The Dawn of the Artifact: The Antiquarian Impulse in England, 1500-1730." In *Studies in Medievalism*, ed. by L. J. Workman, IV: 5-35. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- ZIONKOWSKY, L. 1990. "Territorial Disputes in the Republic of Letters: Canon Formation and the Literary Profession." *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 31: 3-22.

BIANCAMARIA RIZZARDI

# TRACES OF DANTE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

*An Overview*

**ABSTRACT:** The essay intends to offer an overview of Dante's influence on nineteenth-century English poetry, highlighting the various appropriations and introducing a discussion on individual authors. Dante's presence is an essential pivot in the development of modern and contemporary culture as, during the nineteenth century, Italian literature seem to flow into English literature and at the same time represent a great moment in world literature. Furthermore, with the birth of the United States, the great English tradition converges with the American literature and therefore the whole focus of Western and also contemporary culture relates to an extraordinary basin in which the set of sources that complement each other, in particular Dante and English literature, establish a fundamental element for understanding the imaginary itself not only of the twentieth century but also of the contemporary one.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, Romantic Poets, Victorian Poets, Victorian Women Writers.

A great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.

Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Hermon 2005, 367)

Describing the history of Dante's presence in England, Pietro Boitani defines it as a "love story" (2011, 127): and, in fact, as the critic indicates, neither French, nor Iberian cultures, nor the Germanic, the Slav, and Scandinavian cultures – have an equally ancient and intense, though complex and controversial, relationship with Dante. This is due to Dante's penetration in England since the days of Chaucer and decisively confirmed by all the great classics of that literature (Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, up to and beyond Joyce, Eliot, Pound and many contemporary poets) who drew heavily on Dante's model, making use of many motifs, themes and subjects, including: the infernal vision, the ecstatic ones of *Paradise*, the sufferers of *Purgatory*, the memorable autobiography of *Vita*

*Nova*. I would say that there is no theme within the great classics of English literature, that has not found and made some reference to Dante.<sup>1</sup>

An exemplary case of this vital influence for English literature (and beyond)<sup>2</sup> is the relationship which the great Romantic poets<sup>3</sup> and the Victorian English ones<sup>4</sup>—and one could also say American—had with Dante. It is an essential pivot in the development of modern and contemporary culture as, during the nineteenth century, Italian literature seemed to flow into English literature and at the same time represented a great moment in universal literature. It should be borne in mind that, with the birth of the United States, the great English tradition converges with American literature and therefore the whole focus of Western contemporary culture is linked to a set of sources that integrate, usually effectively, what could be defined the conjunction of classical Italian literature - in particular Dante - and English literature establish a fundamental element for understanding the imaginary for the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

If we wanted to try to reduce the reverence of the Romantics and the Victorians for Dante solely to the literary dimension, we would be forced to consider a minimal, albeit significant, segment of a far-reaching phenomenon. The best minds of nineteenth-century English society knew and, not infrequently, studied and cited the *Divine Comedy*.

In 1843, an anonymous reviewer, commenting on the translation of the *Inferno* by John Dayman who had defined Dante “the great Father of Modern Poetry”, (1843. vi) underlined how, in essence, Dante was closer to the English than to the Italian temperament: “His manner is English: it is more direct, more concise, graver, than that of his countrymen in general; and though there are glimpses of passion, tender as well as fierce, his nature was less voluptuous and enjoying”.<sup>6</sup> Behind the reviewer’s words we see a kind of amazement at the fact that such a genius could not be.

<sup>1</sup> Regarding relations between Dante and English Literature see Toynbee 1909; Id. 1921; Dedeyan 1961; Id. 1983; Praz 1962, 63-94; Brand 1965, 163-200; Ellis 1983; Griffiths and 2005; Wallace 2007, 281-304.

<sup>2</sup> On Dante’s influence in Europe during the nineteenth century, see the collected essays edited by Aida Audeh and Nick Havely 2012. The book emphasizes the importance of a multidisciplinary and multilingual approach to the subject of Dante and nineteenth century nationalisms.

<sup>3</sup> See Pite, 1994; Braida, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See Milbank, 2009. In this ground-breaking book, Alison Milbank explains why a comprehension of the Victorian reception of Dante is essential for a full understanding of Victorianism as a whole. Her focus on this much-neglected topic allows her to reconfigure the British nineteenth-century understanding of history, nationalism, aesthetics and gender, and their often-strange intersections. The account also builds towards a demonstration that the modernist perpetuation of the Dante obsession reveals an equal continuity with many aspects of Victorianism. The book provides not only an authoritative introduction to these important cultural themes, but also a re-reading of the genealogy of literature in the modern period. Instead of the Victorian realism challenged by Modernist symbolism’s attempts to transcend linear time, Milbank offers us a contrary, continuous ‘Danteism’. See also Coluzzi 2021.

<sup>5</sup> On particular aspects of my discussion, I refer the reader to Kirkpatrick 1995; Brand 1957; Vassallo 1984; Webb 1976; Sperry 1988; Praz 1942; McDougal 1985; Charity 1974; Manganiello 1989; Reynolds 1981; Heaney 1985, 5-19.

<sup>6</sup> [Unsigned review], *Spectator*, XVI, p. 788

In this essay I have decided to dwell on Dante's traces in the sense that Dante himself gives to the word "traccia", where in *Inf.*, XVIII, ll.79-80, he writes "Del [= dal] vecchio ponte guardavam la traccia / Che venìa verso noi da l'altra banda", ("From the old bridge we ey'd the pack, who came. From th' other side towards us"), trace in this case "group of people", of writers, who proceed in line through the century and who are clearly visible to us even today.<sup>7</sup>

As Alberto Casadei rightly pointed out (2010, 45), the whole of the Dante model over the course of the twentieth century became increasingly present in elective forms of affinity (or, conversely, differentiation), this is due to what has been defined a real "Dante-mania" or, as Foscolo defined it, "Dantelatria"<sup>8</sup> that characterizes the English nineteenth century in which, despite the remoteness of cultural paradigms and historical conditions, universality (in various senses) and visual power (even visionary) have established themselves as determining factors to justify the strength, the power of Dante's poetry.

We are dealing with a period in which it is said that at least one third of the population of Florence was British or American; the British lived the myth of Italy, obviously accompanied by the myth of the great Italian artists, and musicians. These myths made Italy, in particular in the English world of the nineteenth century and then in the American one, the ideal place to which everyone belonged. And to this was added a maximum attention to a political view of Italy. In that period the first ideas of the Risorgimento began to appear in Italy, and the idea of fighting for the unity of the country. England, both at the level of the people and of the intellectuals, would always be at the side of Italy and, this particularly applied to men of culture, such as poets and writers, most famously Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, the Rossettis, Tennyson, the Brownings, Swinburne and so many others.

A sort of preliminary debut could be seen in the work of the great visionary, poet and engraver, and also a great interpreter of literature, William Blake. Blake (who had read Dante in Henry Boyd's translation of 1785)<sup>9</sup> was entrusted by the painter John Linnell with the task of illustrating the *Divine Comedy* in 1824. No less than one hundred and two engravings illustrating some memorable episodes of Dante's *Inferno* were completed before his death in 1827.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it was precisely his work on Dante – defined in the *Dantesque Encyclopedia* by Fortunato Bellonzi (1990) as "the greatest Dantesque

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, see the excellent collection of essays edited by Audeh and Havelly 2012.

<sup>8</sup> "Oggidi, che la venerazione a Dante salì a superstizione, a vera Dantelatria..." (Foscolo 1928, 50).

<sup>9</sup> For a general picture of the interest in Dante in the second half of the 1700s, v. Toynbee 1909 (the second volume); Marshall 1934; Praz 1962; De Sua 1964. In particular: Toynbee 1903.

<sup>10</sup> There are 102 watercolours (72 for *Hell*, 20 for *Purgatory* and 10 for *Paradise*), some pencil drawings, 7 engravings; to all this are added some "annotations" or fragmentary notes present in incomplete drawings, and although these are "working" notes - but perhaps for this very reason - they are precious inasmuch as they contain observations of the poetics underlying the pictorial interpretation. In the mare magnum of studies on the subject, among the most recent, see the useful summary accompanied by an extensive bibliography by De Santis 2018.

iconographic monument of the modern age”, which, in the space of a few decades, transformed Blake from an eccentric and little known poet to a British icon and an internationally renowned artist.

This combination of Blake’s poetic insights and his illustrations of the *Comedy* made proselytes in English culture (a paradigmatic example, is Rossetti, who considered him his hero) and established Dante’s function, of his *Comedy* in particular, amongst the great intellectuals of the time.

One of the main financiers of the first Italian struggles for independence was Byron, - a radical *sui generis*, a kind of Vittorio Alfieri of English literature. Byron, like many other intellectuals, had a particular passion for Dante, translating and then using him - as Shelley would do, or as Derek Walcott would do, to cite one of the many examples of from the 20th century—putting the use of the Dantesque tercet back into circulation in English literature. Therefore, Dante was also an influence from a metrical point of view and not only, since many of his poems hinged on a vision of existence that is even titanic, restoring the influence of the great figures of the *Comedy*. Byron’s *The Corsair* (1814) would be incomprehensible without the Dantesque epigraphs which begin every canto, as would be the *Prisoner of Chillon* (1816) without the episode of Ugolino.

I would also like to mention Byron’s poem in four cantos *The Prophecy of Dante* (1821) which was immediately translated into Italian<sup>11</sup> and which circulated in many European languages. In this, Byron, as was customary in the literature of the time, imagined himself to be the dying Dante and making a prophecy about the future of his fame and of Italy itself. Such an image of a Dante, with whom Byron identified himself, a suffering exile who prophesies about his death and the fate of Italy, is the subject of this extraordinary poem that would have great fame in England in its day. Perhaps today it is less known, but it is certainly significant in enabling us to understand the radical importance of Dante to the culture of the great poets.

2021 marked the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death; it also marked the bicentenary of Keats’ death. In his poetics, Keats, who walked through Scotland reading Dante in Carey’s translations, adopted various themes, subjects and stylistic choices attributable to Dante<sup>12</sup>: his sonnet “A Dream, After Reading Dante’s Episode of Paolo and Francesca” of 1818<sup>13</sup> is exemplary. We also have his notes to the text of Carey’s *Inferno*, from which he drew inspiration in the attempt to write his epic work, *The Fall of Hyperion* (composed in 1815 and which remained unfinished).<sup>14</sup> In *Endymion* (1818) the poet referred to a model of allegoresis

<sup>11</sup> For the first Italian translation see Da Ponte 1821. See also Saglia 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Gittings (1956.) gave a detailed study of Keats’s markings in a copy of Dante’s *Inferno* translated by Cary. He showed us by tracing Dantean echoes in many of Keats’s poems that the influence of Dante on Keats was deeper than previously supposed.

<sup>13</sup> Published for the first time by Leigh Hunt in *The Indicator* 28 June 1820, it was later included in the 1848 edition.

<sup>14</sup> See Saly 1965, 65-78.

and the myth of love, and of beauty, which is partly inspired by Dante's suggestions, particularly in *Paradiso*.

One could not conceive of Tennyson's *Ulysses*—to which I will return shortly—without mentioning its main source, Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), a poem which is part of the history of world literature, to which they will all return, and which encompasses many Dantesque themes. It was Coleridge himself who wrote in the margin “from Dante” and introduced a Dantesque simile from the *Inferno* that makes the reader understand that it is from the Hell that the Ancient Mariner finally leaves to carry out his earthly adventure. As had happened to Dante's Ulysses, the boat of the protagonist of the ballad finally sinks in the whirlpool.<sup>15</sup>

The main theme is, therefore, that of the journey beyond all limits, represented by the journey of Ulysses in the twenty-sixth *canto* of Hell which will remain for a long time in the culture of all centuries and above all in modern and contemporary culture, a sort of narrative archetype to challenge the laws and the limits of nature with the strength of one's reason and with the passion for one's ideals. (I think that even the same titanic but powerless challenge of man through the creation of an entity that should have been superior, is found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) which also draws inspiration from Dante's Ulysses to challenge the rules of nature or man's limits which, however, cannot be overcome).

Coleridge puts the theme of travel at the centre of the narrative, obviously fundamental in a colonial, oceanic and maritime culture like the English one, but at the same time charges it with metaphorical values that reflect Dante's themes. These start with the landing in unknown lands, and with the challenge posed also by sin, the guilt of which the sailor stains himself with by killing the albatross, and by the expiation of which he must take into account. Sin and atonement are fundamental themes in the *Comedy* that all these poets read in excellent translations: either that of Henry Boyd who translated the *Inferno* in 1785 and the entire *Divine Comedy* in 1802; or that of Francis Carey which appeared between 1805 and 1814. The theme of atonement would long remain a dominant theme in the imagination of English and American literature of the following century and beyond: and still today many of the most famous television series produced by the great platforms of various kinds of dramatic genres, have the central theme of sin and atonement, with deep Dantesque roots.<sup>16</sup>

A further trace of Dante can be found in the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. The appeals for freedom and against corruption made by the political Dante, and the prophet

<sup>15</sup> *Hell* 21, ll.25-30; *The Rimes...*, ll. 446-451.

<sup>16</sup> I mention only one of the latest television series that have had a great success for the high quality of the script which is *The Sinner* (2017) which represents sin, the sinner as from the title itself and which is built with a Dante mechanism; but I could also mention the last two or three seasons of *Game of Thrones* (2011). Still others are the television series in which Dante's themes are clearly present, as in *SnowPiercer* (2020) or in the film *Parasite* (2019), both texts based on atonement, on guilt and on the division between guilt and punishment. Dante's culture adds matter and imagination to the imaginary of the Protestant tradition which insisted a lot on this.

Dante, are important matters for Byron as for both Percy and Mary Shelley herself, and we find them expressed in similar ways, in the poetry of Auden, Spender and Cecil Day Lewis.

The relationship between Dante and Shelley,<sup>17</sup> is made clear in his fundamental work on the theory of literature entitled *A Defense of Poetry* (1821)<sup>18</sup>: which sees poetry an essential tool to the understanding not only of life and oneself but which glues together the different forms of human knowledge. Having established this vision of the centrality of poetry, and of literature generally, Shelley refers first of all to Dante who had made the centrality of literature the very meaning of his life and his work. Shelley wrote two extraordinary statements following Dante's practice: the first that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world",<sup>19</sup> that is, it is the poet who, in interpreting the world, hands it over to us in order that he and we will be better able to live in. His task is to speak out, to fight, to legislate, unheeded, it is true, but as an invincible witness to his ideals. (As it will be, among others, also for Louis MacNeice or for Wallace Stevens in the 1900s).

Moreover, in defining Dante, he writes that he is a "bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world;"<sup>20</sup> and further, calls Homer the first and Dante the second epic poet whose works are related to the sentiment and religion of their respective age. Again, Dante is the first religious reformer, the first awakener of entranced Europe, who "created a language in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms."<sup>21</sup> There could not be a better definition of Dante because Dante is precisely this, the Dante that brings us together here, that is, avoiding cataloging him in banal and trivial periodizations, he is really a bridge that connects the most ancient age with the modern one.

Furthermore, in his best poems, Shelley uses abundantly the idea of the dream / vision, the great medieval genre to which, in a certain sense, the *Comedy* itself also belongs. It allows the great ability to represent truths, positions, characterizations of man in the world and in the cosmos through a series of metaphors and allegories. In some of Shelley's best poems—well translated into Italian by Francesco Rognoni (1997)—this theme is relevant, sometimes also described in Dante's tercets. Dante is the main point of reference: suffice it to mention the *Ode to Liberty* (1820), the *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) and other compositions, in which Dante's visionary nature, its allegorical charge are precisely taken up by Shelley to propose them in a new key. In the *Ode to Liberty*, for

<sup>17</sup> Shelley used to read Dante in the english edition *Delle opere di Dante Alighieri con le annotazioni del dottore Anton Maria Biscioni*, Venezia, Gatti 1793.

<sup>18</sup> The essay was written in response to his friend Thomas Love Peacock's article "The Four Ages of Poetry", which had been published in 1820. *A Defense of Poetry* was eventually published, with some edits by John Hunt, posthumously by Shelley's wife Mary Shelley in 1840 in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* by Edward Moxon in London.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., p.90.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit., p.60.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., p. 66.

example, freedom is a sort of *persona*, who speaks like Justinian in the famous canto VI of the *Paradiso* (ll. 1-96). How can one forget the extraordinary poem by Shelley *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation* (1818-19) in which there is a somewhat infernal journey that ends in a madhouse with a madman who seems reminiscent of Torquato Tasso, a figure so dear to the poetics of the Romantic authors? In the encounter and dialogue with this character we find the mechanism, both technical and structural, with which Dante, in the *Inferno* in particular, together with Virgil, addressed his characters; there is even the technique of an interview with a character that he finds in a sort of infernal environment. (How can we not think of the meeting with Stateman “there I saw one that I knew and stopped him crying ... of verses 69-70 of *Waste Land*? Or the meeting that Herbert Reed describes with the “dead masters” in *To a Conscript* 1940? Or again that *Strange Meeting* by Wilfred Owen?)

These are (interconnected) aspects of nineteenth-century poetics, which combined the aspirations for renewal typical of every era with a long-lasting but not rigidly binding tradition, often acquired thanks to the perspective comparison with the Dante model.

This is evident, suffice it to cite a single example, in Carlyle’s third ‘lecture’ “On Heroes and Hero-Worship” (1841), dedicated to Dante and Shakespeare, entitled ‘The Hero as Poet’. From the critical-philological point of view, the operation carried out by Carlyle is an act of misreading, that is, a distorted reading of the Supreme Poet that he carries out with the aim of bending the figure to his ideological design. Carlyle aspires to present Dante and Shakespeare as models which, in terms of the mere ethical-behavioural code, Victorian society cannot help but confront. For this reason, in years in which England offered shelter and support to many Italian exiles, the figure of Dante as an exile stimulated Carlyle’s thought and imagination. For him, Dante was a ‘hero’ who, haughtily rejecting any compromise with power, consistently accepted the bitterness of exile for the sake of his ideas.

In the reading that Carlyle proposed of Dante’s life, it is evident that for him the figure of the hero is constituted around the image of the exile who, despite the adversities of the world, finds in the writing of the *Comedy* the highest point of the realization of his ‘heroic’ mission, which manages to speak to all men, overcoming sectarianisms and partisanship, placing at the centre of his search a universality that invariably implies the precious gift of a truth that can be shared by all men of all ages—the one that offers, as Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* would say, “the lamp of truth” (1849, vol. 8, 231). And it is Ruskin, another great sage of the Victorian era, who will succeed Carlyle in this precise perspective of Dante’s dialogism.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard, it is essential to refer to the fascination of Dante also present in the poetesses as well as in the English female narrators of the time. Here the subject becomes complicated: if in the eighteenth century in general, and in particular among female

<sup>22</sup> For the relationship between Carlyle, Ruskin and Dante, see the detailed contribution of Marroni, 2009, 243-254.

writers, Petrarch was preferred to Dante, because he was the love poet par excellence and therefore the privileged teacher of romantic, sentimental lyric poetry, during the whole of the nineteenth century “Dantolatry” had its obvious repercussions also among English poetesses and novelists.

It was Maria Francesca Rossetti who reiterated, in the preface of her *A Shadow of Dante* (1871), how the value of Dante’s work went far beyond the limits of a nation and an era: “Dante is a name unlimited in place and period. Not Italy, but the Universe, is his birthplace, not the fourteenth century but all Time is his epoch”.<sup>23</sup>

In short, by making Dante the poet who had been able to speak to the whole world and to all peoples, Maria Francesca Rossetti aimed at convincing the English not only of the importance of Dante studies, but also of the validity of both his cosmology and his high ethical-religious teaching.

Furthermore, reading Dante led to an idea of nation and national culture in a period in which women played an active and growing role as cultural creators and mediators. If the interpretation that the nineteenth-century English female artists made of Dante speaks of their aesthetic concerns, there is no doubt that it also influenced their act of self-positioning within the overlap between national and international culture.<sup>24</sup>

Proof of this can be seen in Anna Seward’s correspondence<sup>25</sup> with the great translator of Dante Henry Frances Cary; or in the poem by Felicia Hemans “The Maremma”<sup>26</sup>, in which the poetess retells the story of Pia de’ Tolomei (*Purgatorio* 5.133) in her poetic and even Shakespearean idiom, making it extremely national. It is evident in the preparatory work for the novel *Valperga* (1823) which Mary Shelley did by reading *Le Cronache fiorentine* by Giovanni Villani (1348): the results of her research were published in an essay in the same year. Elizabeth Barrett Browning used tercets in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and, in several of her lyric compositions, makes precise allusions to Dante’s *Comedy*. George Eliot in *Romola* (1863) experimented with various ways of incorporating Dante, using scenes that reflected those of the *Comedy*, or echoes, paraphrases, and direct quotes from Dante, often used in epigraphs. In some of her other novels (*Middlemarch* 1871, *Daniel Deronda* 1876, *Felix Holt* 1866) Eliot makes many specific references to Dante.<sup>27</sup>

All this had probably been increased by the female “Introductions” to Dante, among which, in addition to the aforementioned *A Shadow of Dante* (1871) by Maria Francesca

<sup>23</sup> See Marsh 1994, 392ff.

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, see Saglia, 2012, 184-203.

<sup>25</sup> Twentieth-century scholars have frequently had recourse to Seward’s epistolary references to Dante in order to probe the extent of his presence in Romantic-period-culture. Her remarks have often served to demonstrate that late eighteenth-century commentators evaluated him especially in terms of contemporary taste for, or critique of, the gothic and the macabre. See Seward 1811.

<sup>26</sup> The poem published in *The Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1820, was inspired by Foscolo’s essay on Dante in the *Edinburgh Review*, February 1818 and offers probably one of the most significant female-author appropriations and recreations of a character from the *Commedia*.

<sup>27</sup> In this regard, see the interesting essay by Marroni 1996.

Rossetti, there was *Dante* (1898) in the Blackwood edition of the series “Foreign Classics for English Readers” edited by Margaret Oliphant. As has been shown, in this period, the “female popularizers” produced a large number of Dante translations and rewritings, both in prose and verse, as well as in theatrical works, and thus in a certain sense passed the baton to poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath who, as a young student enrolled at Smith College in Northampton, (Massachusetts) discovered Dante and was struck by the *Divine Comedy*, as we can read in the story *Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom* (written in December 1952). The inextinguishable force of Dante’s poetry in female writing can be read today in the poetry of Louise Gluck, Nobel Prize for Literature in 2020, and author of *Vita Nova*, (1999).

Taken as a whole, all these women writers, through their reading of Dante, broadened their intellectual and creative horizon to reflect, first of all, on the concept of nation as a fundamental framework for the political identity of their ideological and literary interventions. Their appropriation of Dante constitutes a series of attempts to define a position of female cultural authority within both the national and international dimensions. There is no doubt that female writers, through Dante, acquired greater interest in some of the central issues of nineteenth-century literature and politics: and they did so in ways that stand comparison with, but also differ from, the well-known and studied approaches to Dante by male writers who have long been the focus of academic study and critical discussion.

The centrality of Dante, therefore, meant above all the centrality of a very specific cultural tradition: in this sense, all the Rossettis felt that they were its almost exclusive custodians. Maria Christina Rossetti,<sup>28</sup> authoress of *Monna Innominata* (1881), in an article dedicated to Dante which appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1884, reviews the contribution made by her family to the development of Dante’s studies in England:

My father, Gabriele Rossetti, in his “Comento Analitico sull’inferno di Dante” has left to tyros a clue and to fellow-experts a theory. My sister, Maria Francesca Rossetti, has, in her “Shadow of Dante” eloquently expounded the *Divina Commedia* as a discourse of the most elevated faith and morals. My brother Dante has translated with a rare felicity the *Vita Nuova* . . . and Other (political) works of his great namesake. My brother William has, with a strenuous endeavour to achieve close verbal accuracy, rendered the *Inferno* into English verse.<sup>29</sup>

Undoubtedly, in its biographical exceptionality, the Rossetti family represents a unique case in the history of English literature. It is not simply a question of highlighting how two important literary traditions under the sign of the Rossetti meet and face each other, but of realizing the considerable contribution that they, by virtue of this encounter,

---

<sup>28</sup> The analysis of Dantesque loans in *Monna Innominata* (1881) deserves a separate discussion, in which it is possible to focus fully on this literary dialogism that marks the moment in which, with more intensity and conviction, Christina Rossetti decides to confront tradition to verify, in the living body of writing, the ability to “bring together” two languages, two cultures and two mentalities. Marroni also dedicated a detailed treatment to the relationship between Dante and Christina Rossetti in 2002, 261-282.

<sup>29</sup> Christina Rossetti, “The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem”, in *Century Magazine*, XXVII, February 1884, p. 566.

made to the artistic research of the nineteenth century. In fact, their re-reading of Dante led to a radical change and an extraordinary development not only in the literary sphere but also in the pictorial sensitivity, as is masterfully testified by the intense dialogue that the main artistic current of the time, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, undertook with the poet. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had the merit of making the *Vita Nova* and the cult of Beatrice fashionable in England,<sup>30</sup> themes explored and propagandized by his translations, his paintings and his poems. John Ruskin wrote about him in his autobiography which appeared in 1899: “[Dante Gabriel Rossetti] was really not an Englishman, but a great Italian tormented in the Inferno of London» (1985, 451). If his *House of Life* (1881) in verse is profoundly inspired by Dante’s work, no Englishman of the nineteenth century or the following has ever been able to forget his painting *The Salutation of Beatrice* (1880-1882), or the painting of 1871, kept in Liverpool in the Walker Art Gallery, *Dante’s Dream*.

From this moment on, it will no longer be surprising to find Dante in the very heart of the English. If the Brownings kept a portrait hanging in their Florentine home, and Robert builds a *Sordello* (1840) around and against the figure of Dante, Gladstone, the great Victorian Prime Minister, translated parts of the Comedy and confessed to having learned “at the school of Dante a great part of the necessary preparation for politics”.

There is an anecdote told by Hallam Tennyson, in his *Memoir* of his father (1906, 102): Tennyson was standing beside his friend Edward Fitzgerald, “looking at two busts of Dante and Goethe in a shop window in Regent’s Street”. Fitzgerald asked: “What is there wanting in Goethe which the other has?”. Tennyson replied: “The Divine!”

I would say that precisely this aspect, the divine, is what Tennyson faced in his *Ulysses*, whose very first source is Dante’s Ulysses. Faced with Dante’s text, as is natural, the Victorian poet prepared for small and large changes, interventions that also involved the fundamental meanings of the episode of the *Comedy*, which I have had the opportunity to address elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

From a structural point of view, the interest in Dante contributes to intensifying in the Victorian poet the taste for symbolic correspondences and geometries that Tennyson first, and later Joyce, will assign to numbers. One, three and nine, on which the architecture of the Comedy is based, are also the numbers on which that of the Victorian Ulysses hinges: there are three main characters, Ulysses, Telemachus and the crew of his

---

<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had found in the poet and painter William Blake a possible possessor of his soul. Blake's poetry had become accessible to a larger public from 1839 when *Songs of Innocence* were first printed in ordinary type. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Rossetti, at the age of 18, was offered the chance of buying for ten shillings Blake's own note-book, he enthusiastically accepted. He kept the precious volume with him for the rest of his life. Obviously, "the 58 leaves crammed full of Blake's sketches and scribblings" (Preston 43) had a deep and lasting influence on the young painter-poet, whose imagination had come to dwell on an intriguing coincidence: Blake had passed away on 12th August 1827, whereas he, Rossetti, was born on 12th May 1828, exactly nine months later. Could it be possible that the soul of Blake had been intercepted at the moment of his conception? Preston suggests that Rossetti treasured the idea that he could be a reincarnation of Blake (38-41).

<sup>31</sup> Rizzardi 2019, 135-154.

companions. The structure of the text is tripartite. Finally, there are three moments in the narration, the three main acts into which the work is divided. From 3 + 3 + 3 we get nine, which is the perfect number squared. It goes without saying that the reference to perfection, in Tennyson as it will be in Joyce, and unlike Dante, must refer not to God, but to Art, and more specifically, to the ambitions of poetry, to which the Tennysonian ending clearly alludes.

Tennyson also worked and reworked the individual images, the background of the story. What in Dante is a geographical obsession, pointing to the West, turning the stern to the morning, becomes in the English text a temporal coordinate, in which the old age and the approaching death of the protagonists overlap at the time of the fixed departure. at sunset, at the end of the day (ll. 54 ff.). The goal, therefore, is not Dante's "new earth", but a land, a "newer" world.

The Homeric-Dantesque hero is projected towards endless exploration, nothingness and death, making the mad flight, "folle volo" [*Inf.* XXVI.125] of Dante's Ulysses. In fact, the explicit purpose of Ulysses is to "sail beyond the sunset", in Dante's words "di retro al sol", following the sun, [*Inf.* XXVI.117], making the long journey prophesied by Tiresias. Ulysses in Tennyson decides to go beyond that sunset in which the sublime sense of being resides. He decides, like Zarathustra, to "go down". Dante thus finds himself, by an English hand, a prophet of modernity: his Ulysses becomes a forerunner of Milton (whose words Tennyson's monologue ends with), and of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, thus taking, in the Western imagination, the pre-eminent place that belongs to him next to that of Ugolino and Francesca.

This powerful presence of Dante in nineteenth-century English culture entered directly into the great twentieth-century tradition and then into the contemporary one. In the twentieth century, thanks to the work, as we have seen, of the great Dante workshop that was the previous century, Dante's poem is still a decisive model as it manages to express a tension to the absolute that does not cancel history but includes it in its narrative path, placing it as an indispensable premise of a logical and at the same time visionary discourse, which wants to push itself to the limit of the ineffable. And that's right. "The genuine impression of the modern man when meeting in Dante," – says Contini (2001, 110-11) – "is not to come across a tenacious and well-preserved survivor, but to reach someone who arrived before him".

## REFERENCES

- AUDEH, A., HAVELY, N. 2012. *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BISCIONI, A. M. 1793. *Le opere di Dante Alighieri con le annotazioni del dottore Anton Maria Biscioni*. Venezia: Gatti.
- BOITANI, P. 2011. Dante in Inghilterra, *Critica del testo*. XIV/3, pp.227-242.
- BOYD, H. 1785. *A Translation of the Inferno... in English verse, with historical notes, and the life of Dante*, Vols. 2. Dublin: Byrne.
- . 1802. *Dante's Divine Comedy, translated into verse with preliminary essays, notes and illustrations*, Voll. 3. London: Cadell.
- BRAIDA, A. 2004. *Dante and the Romantics*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BRAND, P. 1957. *Italy and the English Romantics. The Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1965. "Dante and the English Poets", in *The Mind of Dante*, edited by U. Limentani, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BYRON, G. 1814, *The Corsair, A Tale, and Other Poems*. London: John Murray.
- . 1816. *The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems*. London: John Murray.
- . 1821. *The Prophecy of Dante. A Poem*. Philadelphia: M. Carey and Sons.
- . 1821. *La Profezia di Dante di Lord Byron. Tradotta in Terza Rima*. Trans. L. Da Ponte. New York: R. and W. A. Bartow.
- CASADEI, A. 2010. "Dante nel ventesimo secolo (e oggi)", in *L'Alighieri*, 35, 51, 45-74.
- CHARITY, C. 1974. *T. S. Eliot: The Dantean Recognitions*, in *The Waste Land in Different Voices*, edited by A. S. Moody, London: Edward Arnold.
- COLUZZI, F. 2021. *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- CONTINI, G. 2001. *Un'interpretazione di Dante*, in *Un'idea di Dante*. Milano: Einaudi.
- DAYMAN, J. 1843. *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri, with Notes and Appendix*. London, William Edward Painter.
- DE SANCTIS, S. 2018. *Blake and Dante - A Study of William Blake's Illustrations of the Divine Comedy Including His Critical Notes*. Rome: Cangemi Editore, International.
- DE SUA, W. J. 1964. *Dante into English: A Study of the Translation of the Divine Comedy in Britain and America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- DEDAYAN, C. 1961. *Dante en Angleterre*. Paris: Editions Didier.
- . 1983. *Dante dans le Romantisme Anglais*. Paris: Editions Sedes.
- ELLIS, S. 1983. *Dante and English Poetry. Shelley to T. S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FOSCOLO, U. 1928. *Saggi sopra il Petrarca*. Lanciano: Carabba.
- GITTINGS, R. 1956. *The Mask of Keats*. London: Heinemann.
- GLUCK, L. 1999. *Vita Nova*. New York: Ecco Press.
- GRIFFITHS, E., REYNOLDS, M. 2005. *Dante in English*. London: Penguin Classics.
- HEANEY, S. 1985. "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review* 15.
- HERMON, W. 2005. *Classic Writings on Poetry*. USA: Columbia University Press.
- KIRKPATRICK, R. 1995. *English and Italian Literature from Dante to Shakespeare*. London: Routledge.
- MACDOUGAL, S. Y. 1985. *T. S. Eliot's Metaphysical Dante*, in *Dante Among the Moderns*, edited by S. Y. McDougal. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- MANGANIELLO, D. 1989. *T. S. Eliot and Dante*, London: Macmillan.
- MARRONI, F. 1996: "The Shadow of Dante: Elizabeth Gaskell and 'The Divine Comedy'." *The Gaskell Society Journal* Jan 1, 1996/10, Periodicals Archive Online 1.
- MARRONI, F. 2002. "Contro l'oblio. Christina Rossetti Dialogues with Dante and Petrarch." *Strumenti Critici* XVII/2 (n. 99) May: 261-282.

- MARRONI, F. 2009. "Carlyle, Ruskin e la 'lampada' dantesca: note su Dante e la cultura inglese dell'Ottocento." In F. Ciompi (ed.). *One of Us. Studi offerti a Mario Curreli*. Pisa: ETS.
- MARSH, J. 1994. *Christina Rossetti. A Literary Biography*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- MARSHALL, R. 1934. *Italy in English Literature: 1755-1815*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- MILBANK, A. 2009. *Dante and the Victorians*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- OLIPHANT, M. 1898. *Dante*. Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- PRAZ, M. 1942: *T. S. Eliot e Dante*, in *Machiavelli in Inghilterra e altri saggi*, Rome: Tumminelli.
- . 1962. "Dante in Inghilterra." In V. Vettori (ed.). *Maestro Dante*. Milano: Marzorati.
- PRESTON, K. 1944. *Blake & Rossetti*. London: Alexander Moring.
- RALPH, P. 1994. *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- REYNOLDS, M. T. 1981. *Joyce and Dante. The Shaping Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- RIZZARDI, B. 2019. *Spots of Time: Lectures on English Literary Tradition*. Pisa: ETS
- ROSSETTI, C. 1884. "The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem." *Century Magazine* XXVII/February.
- RUSKIN, J. 1903-1912. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook - Alexander Wedderburn. London: Library Edition, 39 vols.
- RUSKIN, J. 1985. *Praeterita*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
- SAGLIA, D. 2012. "Dante and the British Romantic Women Writers: Writing the Nation, Defining National Culture", in A. Audeh & N. Havelly (edited by), *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, pp. 184-203.
- SAGLIA, D. 2019. *European Literatures in Britain, 1815-1832: Romantic Translations*. vol. 123. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SALY, J. 1965. "Keats's Answer to Dante: 'The Fall of Hyperion'." *Keats-Shelley Journal* Winter/14.
- SEWARD, A. 1811. *Letters of Anna Seward. Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*. Ed. by A. Constable, 6 vols. Edinburgh: Constable.
- SHELLEY WOLLSTONECRAFT, M. 2000. *Valperga: or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. Michael Rossington, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1840. *Percy Bysshe Shelley. Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*. London: by Edward Moxon.
- SHELLEY, P. B. (1845) 1904. *A Defense of Poetry*. Ed. by M. Shelley. Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Company.
- . 1997. *Opere*. Trans.it. by F. Rognoni, Turin, Einaudi.
- SPERRY, S. M. 1988. *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Verse*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- TENNYSON, H. 1906. *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son*. London: Macmillan.
- TOYNBEE, P. 1903. "English Translations of Dante in the Eighteenth Century." *Journal of Comparative Literature*: 345-365.
- . 1909. *Dante in English Literature. From Chaucer to Cary (c. 1380-1844)*, 2 vols. London: Methuen.
- . 1921. *Britain's Tribute to Dante in Literature and Art. A Chronological Record of 540 Years (c. 1380-1920)*. London: Oxford University Press.
- VASSALLO, P. 1984. *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence*. London: Macmillan Press.
- WALLACE, D. 2007. *Dante in English*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Ed. by R. Jacoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WEBB, T. 1976. *The Violet and the Crucible. Shelley and Translation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.



PAOLA SPINOZZI

# DANTE, DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI, AND THEIR VERBAL/VISUAL *PERSONAE*

**ABSTRACT:** Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Dante Alighieri. The New Life (La Vita Nuova)*, published in *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)* (1847-48, published 1861) and the innumerable sketches, drawings, and paintings he dedicated to Dante generate connections between two different epochs and cultural areas. Puzzling and enlightening, they are verbal and visual transpositions as well as original works of art that invite an enquiry into Rossetti's interart, transcultural, and self-reflexive appropriation and re-shaping of Dante's poetics and aesthetics.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante Alighieri, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Vita Nuova*, Translation, Illustration, Verbal/Visual Transposition.

## Dante and Dante Gabriel

In the preface to *The Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri* (1835) Charles Lyell, Rossetti's godfather, sounds unintentionally ironic when he proclaims that "the proposed notes [to the translation] have been relinquished, in consequence of the intention of Signor Rossetti to publish a volume of Illustrations, which, by the additional and unexpected light it will throw on the *Canzoniere*, would render them of little value" (Lyell 1835, 9). Of course, Rossetti never accomplished that grandiose task.

Faithfulness to and autonomy from the original text are individually defined by each translator and illustrator. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translations and illustrations of Dante Alighieri and early Italian poets reveal a deep knowledge and interpretation of the Due and Trecento, simultaneously confirming and deconstructing the assumption, well established in the Victorian age, that a verbal or visual transposition should be as close as possible to the original. Rossetti's understanding and appropriation of Dante's poetics is an exceptional transcultural and interart endeavour. Through his figurations, Rossetti makes not only early Italian literature and painting accessible to an English-speaking audience, but also articulates his own verbal/visual aesthetics.

## The Early Italian Poets and Dante

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the relationship between a man and a woman as a feudal bond between a vassal and his lord was at the core of a poetic genre inaugurated by the troubadours of Southern France. In Italy troubadour poetry was assimilated by the Scuola Siciliana which developed in Palermo at the royal court of Frederick II between around 1220 and 1266, the year of his son Manfredi's death. Sicilian poets brought the genre to a higher level of sophistication, celebrating ladies who inspire noble deeds while remaining unattainable, and creating a highly formalised idiom which achieved the renown of a national language, even if still imbued with regional features and known exclusively to an élite of poets and dignitaries. Later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Dolce Stil Novo blended troubadour and Sicilian models and produced more refined and introspective poetry. In the *canzone* "Al cor gentile rempaira sempre amore" ("Within the gentle heart Love shelters him"), Guido Guinizelli, born in Bologna between 1230 and 1240, explains why Love will not accept being unrequited.

Dante Alighieri shaped his own poetic mode by drawing inspiration from the evolving forms of earlier and contemporary lyric poetry. From 1283, at the age of eighteen, to 1294, when the XLII chapters of the *Vita Nuova* were published, he appropriated and gradually moved away from his models. While the rhymes in chapters I to XVIII of the *Vita Nuova* are inspired by the Sicilian School, Guittone D'Arezzo and Guido Cavalcanti, his original voice emerges from the *poesie della loda*, which enhance the Dolce Stil Novo ideal of femininity by praising the woman-angel. In "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare", "Vede perfettamente omne salute", and "Ne li occhi porta la mia donna amore" the expression of love as passion is sublimated into an appreciation of the uplifting spiritual power generated by his beloved. Expanding on the image of the woman as an angel created by Guinizelli, Dante composed his poems of praise for "una cosa venuta / da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare", "a creature sent from Heaven to stay / On earth, and show a miracle made sure" (Alighieri 1861, 281, lines 7-8). By expressing his ecstatic admiration for her virtues, the poet acknowledges that she is the visible manifestation of the Divine and acts as the intermediary between man and God. The *Vita Nuova* encapsulates his personal style as a love poet: "The ecstatic tone, the gentle elegance, the youthful simplicity that characterize his poetry are reflected values, the result of an artistic maturity achieved through the experience of a certain sensual realism of the Sicilian school, of the courteous formalism of the Provençal school and of the learned manner, abstractly conceptual, of the Tuscan school" (Russo 1956, 57, note 2).

In the *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308-1320) Dante reflects on the ambivalent impact of the Dolce Stil Novo. Guinizelli's poetic manifesto calls for a critique because Love can ennoble and guide to salvation but also lead to sin and damnation if morbid fantasies prevail over rationality. In the V canto of the *Inferno* Francesca da Rimini, describing how

she and Paolo Malatesta shared their first kiss, blames the book *Lancelot du Lac* for generating love-as-passion, which is deceptive and threatening. However, in the XXVI canto of the *Purgatorio* Dante encounters Guinizelli and defines him as “padre / mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai / rime d’amor usar dolci e leggiadre”, “father to me and the others, who used sweet and charming love rhymes” (lines 97-99), recognising his mentorship. In the decades between the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*, Dante rethinks the Dolce Stil Novo concept of love, stressing that woman’s moral and spiritual integrity has the power to transform man’s earthly passion into a quest for virtue and desire for transcendence.

Dante’s enquiry into love as a form of sensual and spiritual agency captured the attention of young Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was introduced to Italian literature by his father Gabriele. Rossetti senior’s scholarly research focused on the allegorical, symbolic, and esoteric meanings of the *Divine Comedy* and involved a process of identification with Dante’s condition as a political exile. Instead, Rossetti junior’s interest in early Italian poetry originated from two different aspects. On the one hand, the poetic renderings of the tension between male gaze and female appeal, of the contrast between desire and sublimation in the *Vita Nuova* stimulated Dante Gabriel’s verbal and visual imagination. On the other hand, the rivalry between medieval poets such as Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti and Dante and painters such as Cimabue and Giotto inspired the construction of his own dual identity and public persona.

### Dante Gabriel Rossetti Translator of the *Vita Nuova* (betw. 1292-94)

In Great Britain the *Vita Nuova* had been the object of scholarly studies, but the first partial translation was completed only in 1830 by Charles Lyell and published in London in 1835 as *The Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri, Including the Poems of the Vita Nuova and Convito; Italian and English*. Lyell did not respect the original structure, consisting of chapters in three parts: the semi-autobiographical narrative, the lyric inspired by it, and brief explanation of the structure. He omitted all prose writing and adopted arbitrary editing criteria. The unique cohesion of the original text is thus affected by Lyell’s odd juxtaposition of titles in the table of contents, where the poems composed for the *Vita Nuova* are alphabetically listed together with the canzoni of the *Convito* and the poems of the *Canzoniere*.

At the age of twenty Rossetti produced the first English translation of early Italian poetry and the *Vita Nuova* in rhymed verse and original metres. Written between 1847-48 and published in 1861, *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D’Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300). In the Original Metres together with Dante’s Vita Nuova Translated by D.G. Rossetti* required more than a decade of work and involved getting in tune with the

diverse, and distinctive, artistic personalities of the Scuola Siciliana and Dolce Stil Nuovo. The translations, sketches, drawings, watercolours, and oil paintings he produced, and re-produced, are verbal and visual transpositions as well as original artworks.

A philological approach to early Italian literature and painting was an asset that Rossetti deemed essential and yet rare to find. As David A. Ludley observes:

The quality Rossetti most favored in Browning but found lacking in Tennyson was an awareness of early Italian art: “I found his knowledge of early Italian Art beyond that of anyone I ever met, — *encyclopaedically* beyond that of Ruskin himself.” For a poet of Browning’s ability to possess an “encyclopaedic” knowledge of such painters as Giotto and Fra Lippo Lippi was to invite immediate Pre-Raphaelite sainthood. (Ludley 1999, 30)

Rossetti’s view of philology as the foundation on which to build a strong hermeneutic act is evidence of his modernity. In the *Preface to the First Edition of The Early Italian Poets* he explains why interpretation should prevail over literality:

The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty. Poetry not being an exact science, literalness of rendering is altogether secondary to this chief aim. I say literalness, not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing. When literalness can be combined with what is thus the primary condition of success, the translator is fortunate, and must strive his utmost to unite them; when such object can only be attained by paraphrase, that is his only path. Any merit possessed by these translations is derived from an effort to follow this principle. (Alighieri 1861, viii)

Rossetti’s awareness that translations are adaptations emerges from the claim that freshness of language is the main goal of the translator who must constantly choose whether to achieve it through literalness or paraphrase. The ability to elucidate the original text thanks to philological knowledge and the desire to create a fresh work of art thanks to interpretation are his innovative contributions to the Victorian reception of early Italian poetry and painting. The interplay of verbal and visual interpretation, adaptation, and rendition of key episodes imbued with allegorical and symbolical meanings earns him an exceptional position among the Dantists and allows him to become a prominent cultural mediator as well as a creator of original verbal/visual poetics (Spinozzi 2009).

The subjection of a man to a woman, deriving from troubadour poetry, is constantly emphasised in the *Vita Nuova*. In Chapter XII, the ballata is personified and asked to deliver a message to Beatrice:

Dille: “Madonna, lo suo cuore è stato  
con sì fermata fede,  
che’n voi servir l’ha ‘mpronto onne pensiero:  
tosto fu vostro, e mai non s’è smagato”.

Say to her also: “Lady, his poor heart  
Is so confirmed in faith  
That all its thoughts are but of serving thee:  
‘Twas early thine, and could not swerve apart.”

Sed ella non ti crede,  
di che domandi Amor, che sa lo vero:  
ed a la fine falle umil preghero,  
lo perdonare se le fosse a noia,  
che mi comandi per messo ch'eo moia,  
e vedrassi ubbidir ben servidore.  
(Alighieri 1951, 41-42, lines 25-34)

Then, if she wavereth,  
Bid her ask Love, who knows if these things be.  
And in the end, beg of her modestly  
To pardon so much boldness: saying too: -  
"If thou declare his death to be thy due,  
The thing shall come to pass, as doth behove".  
(Alighieri 1861, 242, lines 25-34)

As a sinner hopes that God's mercy will grant his salvation, Dante submits his life to Beatrice: it is the supreme tribute paid to the perfection of the beloved. Dante appropriates the medieval concept of martyrdom in the name of love, according to which man undergoes extremely challenging trials to win the respect of the lady he loves. Rossetti modifies the original. The direct speech in lines 25-28, where the personification of the ballata talks to Dante's beloved, is resumed in lines 33-34 of Rossetti's translation, to enhance the dramatic effect. Not only does the modification show his originality as a translator and a poet simultaneously, but it also proves his ability as a cultural mediator. The rhetorical image of the ballad, captured in the imaginary act of directly speaking to Beatrice twice rather than only once like in the Italian original, demonstrates Rossetti's disposition to play with language: by strengthening the trope of personification, he shows an English-speaking audience how a poem can appear so vividly real as to be able to act as an intermediary between the writer and his beloved.

The cult of the *donna angelicata* suits Rossetti's inclination to idealize love. More importantly, the idea, pursued by the Stilnovo poets and by Dante, that aristocracy is the distinctive mark of a noble spirit appeals to Rossetti's artistic beliefs.

### The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice (1848-1849 and 1853)

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood explored primitivism and medievalism, seeking to revive the pristine quality that they believed the arts possessed before the idealization of Raphael and the stylization of Mannerism. How they sought the new in the old and experimented with ways of re-figuring medieval art emerges from the stylistic features of their early works: the geometrical settings, the presence of elongated and angular figures, the emphatic gestures. For Rossetti being a primitivist and a medievalist meant being a Dantist. Rossetti's pen and ink drawing *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (1848-1849), also known as *Dante Drawing an Angel* [Fig. 1], and the watercolour *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (1853) [Fig. 2] offer an insight into his reception of Dante through the visual medium.

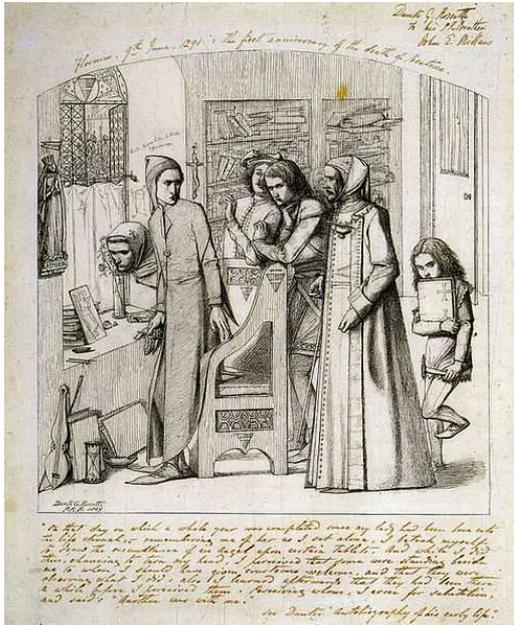


Figure 1 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (also known as *Dante Drawing an Angel*), 1848-1849



Figure 2 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, 1853

The drawing is a bimedial work that exhibits the narrative in the *Vita Nuova* along with Rossetti’s rendition. On the wall by the window, above Dante’s head, he wrote these words: “Beata Anima bella, chi te vede, 9 Giugno, 1290.” And below the image he inserted this excerpt:

“On that day on which a whole year was completed since my lady had been born into the life eternal, – remembering me of her as I sat alone, I betook myself to draw the resemblance of an angel upon certain tablets. And while I did thus, chancing to turn my head, I perceived that some were standing beside me to whom I should have given courteous welcome, and that they were observing what I did: also I learned afterwards that they had been there a while before I perceived them. Perceiving whom, I arose for salutation, and said, “Another was with me.”

See Dante’s “Autobiography of his early life.”

The wooden chair in the middle of the room bisects the space, separating the young poet close to the desk where he was drawing Beatrice from the visitors standing behind him, except for the one leaning forward to glance at his papers. The sharp lines, the suspicious stare on Dante’s face, and the puzzled expressions of the visitors conjure up an uncanny medieval atmosphere.

The 1859 watercolour succeeds in bringing together the meticulous reconstruction of a medieval interior and the rendition of an inner mood. The poet’s solitude (“io mi sedea in parte,” “as I sat alone”), his seclusion and absent-mindedness (“elli erano stati

già alquanto anzi che io me ne accorgesse”, “they had been there a while before I perceived them”), and the intimate tone of the whole scene are delicately rendered.

Dante is lost in the vision of Beatrice and yet the physical contact among the figures, which starts from the intertwining of the hands and arms of the three visitors and reaches up to his shoulder, generates a sense of empathy. The rendition of Dante evoking Beatrice (“Altri era testé meco, però pensava”, “Another was with me”) is Rossetti’s finest achievement. He captures the very moment before Dante gives verbal expression to his rapture through dramatic visual clues – the fixed eyes, the left hand that holds the drawing, and the body half turned towards his visitors that suggests a sense of in-between-ness.

*The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, together with the other illustrations of the *Vita Nuova*, offers an insight into Rossetti’s early construction of Pre-Raphaelite Primitivism, aimed at reviving the earnestness and spontaneity of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century artists (Spinozzi 2007). It also reveals that, for Rossetti, illuminating Dante’s life and love lyrics meant identifying the sources of authentic autobiographical inspiration and shaping them to express his own authentic creativity and multiple talent.

### *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* (1852 and 1859)

Rossetti portrayed Giotto who paints the portrait of Dante in the 1852 pen and ink drawing [Fig. 3], the 1852 watercolour [Fig. 4] and the 1859 unfinished watercolour and pencil on cream paper [Fig. 5].



Figure 3 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1852



Figure 4 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1852



Figure 5 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1859 (ca.)

Together, the three versions simultaneously produce an interart, transcultural, and self-reflexive work of art. Firstly, they visually render the lines Dante dedicated to Giotto, Cimabue, Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and himself in the XI canto of the *Purgatorio*. Secondly, the transpositions delve into Dante's reception of contemporary painters and poets. Thirdly, the artists Dante mentions to define his identity become *personae* through which Rossetti shapes his own identity, both personal and cultural, and expresses his aesthetic beliefs.

The drawing is complemented by a transcription of the lines 94-99 from the XI *Canto* of the *Purgatorio* and the two opening lines of sonnet XXVI, "Vede perfettamente ogni salute" ["For certain he hath seen all perfectness"], from the *Vita Nuova*:

"Credette Cimabue nella pittura  
Tener lo campo; ed ora ha Giotto il grido,  
Sì che la fama di colui s'oscura.  
Così ha tolto l'uno all'altro Guido  
La gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato  
Chi l'uno e l'altro caccierà di nido."

Vede perfettamente ogni salute  
Chi la mia donna – tra le donne – vede

While conveying Rossetti's knowledge and appreciation of early Italian culture, the drawing functions as a powerful connector between two artists in their contexts. Dante talks about Giotto as the painter who surpassed Cimabue, mentions Guido Cavalcanti as the poet who surpassed Guido Guinizelli, and alludes to himself as the one who may be destined to achieve greater fame than both of them. Dante's self-mirroring is captured

and mirrored through another medium, an illustration that visually represents the self-reflexive lines of the Florentine poet and produces more self-reflexivity by indirectly pointing to Rossetti's own aspiration. In order to decipher the drawing, it is fundamental to reconstruct the mesh of transcultural and interart associations.

The verbal component disappears in the watercolours. William Michael Rossetti offers a sumptuous ekphrasis of his brother's 1852 watercolour in a review published in *The Spectator* in 1852, where he explains that Giotto's portrait of Dante in his early youth had been recently discovered in a church in Florence. The review captures the essence of the composition mentioning Dante's first experience of love, art, and friendship, interpreting the pomegranate as the symbol of religious mystery, and drawing attention to Dante's awareness of the presence of Beatrice, and change of countenance. The art critic acutely observes that both Cavalcanti and Guinizelli are present, the former physically, the latter symbolically through the line "Al cuor gentil ripara sempre amore" in the book held by Cavalcanti and suggests that old Cimabue's discomfort transpires from his perusal of Giotto's portrait.

There is plenty of material here for an intellectual painter to work out to effect in a picture: the principal executive quality of the sketch is its grave and even melancholy intensity of expression. Cavalcanti's knees appear to us placed somewhat too low, and Dante's hands are drawn rather harshly. (W. M. Rossetti 1852, 1212)

Like his brother Dante Gabriel, William Michael Rossetti shows deep philological knowledge of the cultural context and the symbolic meanings conjured up by Dante Gabriel but says nothing about the possible connections between the early Italian masters portrayed in the drawing and the poet/painter who portrayed them. His meticulous assessment invites a comparison with a review published by an unknown critic in the *Manchester Guardian* the same year:

Mr D.J. Rossetti [*sic*] contributes two sketches of remarkable power, both having references to Dante. [...] Both these works, though with a slight tendency to extravagance of expression, have still a certain depth of earnestness, well according with their subject. Mr Rossetti is a genuine prae-Raffaelite (the word is a misnomer applied to Millais and Hunt) – he really imitates to a considerable extent the manner of some of the earlier Italian painters, and in a way which we are not always able to approve. (Author Unknown 1852, 875)

The spelling mistakes ("D.J. Rossetti", "prae-Raffaelite") and inaccuracies ("misnomer", "imitates to a considerable extent") in the review show how important it is to be acquainted with the work of Dante Alighieri, early Italian poets and painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the Pre-Raphaelites to decode the transcultural and interart nexus. However, the reviewer praises the watercolour for its originality which he hopes the artist will be able to strengthen in the future.

Rossetti himself illuminates his watercolour in a letter to Thomas Woolner of 8 January 1853. Mentioning the Dantesque sketches exhibited at the Winter Exhibition of Sketches and Drawings at 121 Pall Mall in 1852, he focuses on the one called “The Youth of Dante”, in which Giotto paints Dante. He explains that the treatment of the subject is quite different from anything Woolner has seen and focuses on the portrayal of Cimabue, Cavalcante, Beatrice, and some other ladies. Then he offers an extensive explanation of the historical, iconographic, and subjective aspects involved:

It illustrates a passage in the Purgatory which perhaps you know, where Dante speaks of Cimabue, Giotto, the two Guidos (Guinicelli and Cavalcante, the latter of whom I have made reading aloud the poems of the former who was then dead) and, by implication, of himself. For the introduction of Beatrice, who with the other women (their heads only being seen below the scaffolding) are making a procession through the church, I quote a passage from the Vita Nuova. I have thus all the influences of Dante’s youth Art, Friendship and Love with a real incident embodying them. (Woolner 1917, 49)

Rossetti is right in noticing that the merit of his illustration consists in the choice of representing Dante in a specific period of his life overflowing with creativity, camaraderie, and affection. F. G. Stephens contributes to the contextualisation of the watercolour in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1894), clarifying that “A sketch for [*Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*] was shown, a most exceptional circumstance with regard to a Rossetti, as No. 7, in a ‘Winter Exhibition of Drawings and Sketches at 121 Pall Mall, 1852’; with it were his *Beatrice meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast* (196), and *A Sketch for a Portrait in Venetian Costume* (20)” (Stephens 1894, 32-34, note 1).

The 1859 watercolour is difficult to compare to the previous versions because its unfinished status affects its transcultural and interart value. Clearly the stronger focus on the three figures representing Giotto, Dante, and Cavalcanti and the vagueness of the setting, on which their identification depends, weakens the allegorical value that permeates the previous versions and increases the ornamental effect.

David H. Riede observes that Rossetti’s pictorial intention is to illustrate that “Giotto and Dante, the poet already born to replace Cavalcanti, represent the culmination of early Italian art; their presence together on a raised platform represents a celebration of art and Rossetti’s act of homage to the masters of the tradition that has formed him” (Riede 1983, 66). Riede’s focus on Rossetti’s acknowledgment of his cultural background and source of inspiration overlooks the poet/painter’s possible identification with the young Dante’s awareness of his own potential. Malcolm Warner notes that Riede does not discuss the drawing in relation to Giotto or Dante, but rather explores Rossetti’s desire to bring together poetry and painting, appreciating Riede’s distance from an interpretation of Rossetti’s work as the mirror to his emotional life (Warner 1984, 793). To avoid focusing exclusively on Rossetti’s aesthetics and

overlooking his verbal and visual bond with the Due and Trecento, it is necessary to interconnect literature and the arts in medieval Italy and Victorian England.

Julian Trehuerz examines Rossetti's intention to take up the legacy of early Italian painters and poets: "in the painting [Dante] therefore holds a pomegranate, symbol of immortality. Rossetti may also have had in mind his own role in reviving the fame of his artistic forebears through his paintings and his translations of Italian poetry" (Trehuerz 2003, 28). "And, one might well add," observes Jerome J. McGann, "through his own original writings as well" (McGann 2008). One might further add that, while honouring the cultural memory of Italy, Rossetti was willing to be appreciated for his multiple talent as a translator and an illustrator, a poet and a painter.

Leonée Ormond mentions *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* to reinforce her argument about Rossetti's determination to develop his artistic identity through systematic, in-depth, and indirect study of European Old Masters. The source of inspiration for the watercolour was his father's watercolour copy of a head of Dante painted by Giotto and found under whitewash in Florence. Rossetti was also familiar with the collections of Lady Ashburton, F. R. Leyland, the owner of the four panels of Botticelli's *Nastagio Degli Onesti* which fascinated him, and William Graham. He also enjoyed private collections in Leeds in 1868, admired Carpaccio, Titian, Moroni, Bellini, and Velázquez, and appreciated tracings and copies from early Italian art made for the Arundel Society and exhibited at the Crystal Palace in 1856. He visited the Louvre, where he likely saw paintings by Giotto and Benozzo Gozzoli, was well acquainted with London galleries and reproductions, and received photographs and engravings from his friends during their travels (Ormond 2006, 168).

Dante Gabriel Rossetti explores Dante's meta-artistic, self-reflexive autobiographical narrative and love poetry while he develops his own meta-artistic, self-reflexive double talent. Dante's work of art is both illuminated and eclipsed, its meaning is highlighted while other meanings are produced. The complexity of Dante's and Dante Gabriel's work has produced a cross-cultural *mise en abyme* in which each magnifies and is magnified by the other.

## REFERENCES

- ALIGHIERI, D. 1956. *La "Vita Nuova"*. With an Introduction and Notes by L. Russo (ed.). Messina – Firenze: Casa Editrice G. D'Anna.
- . 1835. *The Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri, Including the Poems of the Vita Nuova and Convito; Italian and English*. Trans. by C. Lyell. London: John Murray.
- . 1861. *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300), In the Original Metres together with Dante's Vita Nuova Translated by D.G. Rossetti*. Part I. Poets chiefly before Dante; Part II. Dante and his Circle. London: Smith, Elder, and Co.
- . 1874. *Dante and His Circle. With the Italian Poets Preceding Him (1100-1200-1300). A Collection of Lyrics, Edited, and Translated in the Original Metres*, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Revised and Rearranged Edition. Part I. Dante's Vita Nuova, etc. Poets of Dante's Circle. Part II. Poets Chiefly Before Dante. London: Ellis and White.
- AUTHOR Unknown. 1852. "Review." *Manchester Guardian*, 29 December: 875.
- BAL, M., BRYSON, N. 2001. *Looking In. The Art of Viewing*. London: Routledge.
- COMETA, M. 2020. *Cultura visuale*. Milano: Raffaele Cortina.
- CRUISE, C. 2004. "'Sincerity and Earnestness': D. G. Rossetti's Early Exhibitions 1849-53." *The Burlington Magazine* 146, 1210: 4-12.
- GRAY, N. 1974. *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves*. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd.
- GRAYSON, C. 1985. "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Translation of the *Vita Nuova*." In C. Gizzi (ed.). *Dante Alighieri, Vita Nuova, con la traduzione inglese e le illustrazioni di D.G. Rossetti*, 17-23. Milano: Mazzotta.
- LUDLEY, D. 1991. "Anna Jameson and D. G. Rossetti. His Use of Her Histories." *Woman's Art Journal* 12/2: 29-33.
- MCGANN, J. (ed.). 2008. *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A Hypermedia Archive*. Accessed 5 March 2022. <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org>>
- MILBANK, A. 1995. "Dante, the Victorians, and the Distancing of History." *Studies in Medievalism VII*: 155-168.
- . 1998. *Dante and the Victorians*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- MITCHELL, W.J.T. 2015. *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P.
- . 2005. *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P.
- ORMOND, L. 2006. "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Old Masters." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36, 2: 153-168.
- RIEDE, D.H. 1983. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- ROSSETTI, W.M. 1852. "Review of the Winter Exhibition of Sketches and Drawings." *Spectator*, 18 December: 1212.
- . 1895. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters with a Memoir*, 2 vols. London: Ellis.
- SPINOZZI, P. 2007. "Primitivo, primigenio. La ricerca dell' "autenticità" nell'estetica preraffaellita." In G. Golinelli (ed.). *Il primitivismo e le sue metamorfosi. Archeologia di un discorso culturale*, 289-305. Bologna: Clueb.
- . 2009. "Journeying through Translation: Dante among the Victorians, Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Medieval Italy." In F. Orestano, F. Frigerio (eds.). *Strange Sisters: Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, 77-96. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- . 2012. *The Germ. Origins and Progenies of Pre-Raphaelite Interart Aesthetics*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- STEPHENS, F. G. 1894. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London: Seeley and Co.

- TREHUERZ, J. 2003. "Dante Gabriel Rossetti." In R. Asleson (ed.). *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Masters: the Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection*, 26-43. London: Royal Academy of Arts.
- WARNER, M. 1984. "Review of 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision' by D. G. Riede." *The Burlington Magazine* 126/981: 792-793.
- WOODHOUSE, J. 1984. "D. G. Rossetti Translator of the *Vita Nuova*". In C. Gizzi (ed.). *Dante Gabriele Rossetti*, 69-74. Milano: Mazzotta.
- WOOLNER, A. 1917. *Thomas Woolner, R.A., Sculptor and Poet; His Life in Letters*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Fig. 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (also known as *Dante Drawing an Angel*), 1848-1849

Pen and Brown Ink on Card, 15 3/4 x 12 7/8 inches

City of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante\\_Gabriel\\_Rossetti\\_-\\_The\\_First\\_Anniversary\\_of\\_the\\_Death\\_of\\_Beatrice\\_\(1849\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_The_First_Anniversary_of_the_Death_of_Beatrice_(1849).jpg)

Fig. 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, 1853

Watercolour, 16 1/2 x 24 inches

Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The-first-anniversary-of-the-death-of-beatrice-1853.jpg>

Fig. 3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1852

Pen and ink, 8 x 7 inches

London, Tate Gallery

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Study\\_for\\_%60Giotto\\_Painting\\_the\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Dante%27.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Study_for_%60Giotto_Painting_the_Portrait_of_Dante%27.jpg)

Fig. 4. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1852

Watercolour, 14 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches

Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection

Exhibition History: The Old Watercolour Society, Exhibition of Sketches and Drawings Winter 1852;

R.A. 1883 (no.365); R.A., 2003, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Masters*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante\\_Gabriel\\_Rossetti\\_-\\_Giotto\\_Painting\\_the\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Dante.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_Giotto_Painting_the_Portrait_of_Dante.jpg)

Fig. 5. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1859 (circa)

Watercolour and pencil on cream paper, 18 x 21 3/4 inches

Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante\\_Gabriel\\_Rossetti\\_-\\_Giotto\\_Painting\\_Dante%27s\\_Portrait.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_Giotto_Painting_Dante%27s_Portrait.jpg)

GIOVANNI BASSI

## A TURNING POINT

*Walter Pater's Dante*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay investigates Walter Pater's reception of Dante. From his juvenile production to his later writings, Pater's *oeuvre* is interspersed with references, quotations, and allusions to Dante, and often directly discusses important aspects of the poet and his works. Pater strongly sensualises Dante's idea of love, which he sees as functional to his own exploration of sensoriality. In this sense, his reading of Dante emphasises the features of Dante's realism (and symbolism) that are closer to his own poetics, interpreting them as emblematic of his artistic ideal of the fusion of matter and spirit. Moreover, Pater views Dante as instrumental in some of the cultural-historical phenomena – the Renaissance, Romanticism, modernity – which are pivotal for his aestheticist conception of history.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, Pater, realism, modernity, senses, aesthetics.

Walter Pater's late narrative masterpiece, the proto-modernist "Emerald Uthwart" recounts the tragic coming-of-age story of a boy with a rare, enigmatic type of personality, from his birth in the scented gardens of Sussex to his premature death amid the soft flowers of his childhood.<sup>1</sup> The central section of the short story, which focuses on the protagonist's schoollyears at a prestigious college in Canterbury, contains one of the numerous allusions to Dante in Pater's works. By slightly altering Dante's apostrophising of Aristotle as "l maestro di color che sanno" ("the master of those who know," *Inferno* IV, l. 131), Pater likens the "sense of authority" imparted on children by the study of the classics to the "impenetrable glory round 'the masters of those who know'" (Pater 2014, 252).<sup>2</sup> Other than investing Pater's insight into the English educational system with the authority of Aristotle and the other Pagan sages included in Dante's Limbo, in this short story the quotation from Dante is not particularly meaningful per se and should rather be read as part of a constellation of references to classical literature which intersperse Pater's somewhat solemn representation of the protagonist's school. And yet, if this quotation does not add much to the interpretation of "Emerald Uthwart," it is certainly revealing of Pater's worship of Dante, whom in many respects he viewed—just as Dante himself viewed Aristotle—as "the master of those who know."

<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in periodical form in 1892 and then posthumously included in *Miscellaneous Studies* (1895).

<sup>2</sup> All references to the *Divina Commedia* are to Dante 2010, and are by *cantica*, and canto and line number in the body of the text.

The figure of Dante looms large in Pater's *oeuvre*. From his juvenile production to his later writings, Pater often mentioned, alluded to, or discussed, even at length, various aspects of Dante and his works. Quotations from Dante, albeit nearly always in English, are also rather frequent in Pater's writings. In addition to this pervasiveness, Pater's lifelong interest in Dante is also expressed by the centrality that he attributed to Dante in the history of literature and the arts, by his insistence, in other words, on Dante's fundamental place within Western cultural tradition. As a testimony to this, it suffices to mention that, in Pater's essay on "Style," published in 1888 and then collected in *Appreciations* (1889), Dante's *Divine Comedy* is numbered among the very few works, together with *Les Misérables*, *Paradise Lost*, and the King James Bible, which can be unquestionably regarded as "great art" (Pater 1974, 122). Indeed, Pater mentions Dante's concern with "the glory of God" (123) as a perfect example of the high moral purposes that should characterise great art.

Even though in his writings Pater discusses and uses exclusively the *Commedia* and the early prosimetrum *Vita Nova*, which were Dante's most popular books at the time, it appears that he had a certain degree of familiarity with, or at least, interest in, Dante's lesser-known works. In an 1879 letter to Alexander Macmillan Pater tries (unsuccessfully) to persuade the publisher to consider for publication a translation of Dante's *Convivio* that his young friend who would later become the linguist Edward Spencer Dodgson (1857-1922) was "anxious to make" (Evans 1970, 36). Presenting himself as *au courant* with the latest trends in Dante's reception, Pater remarks that the Dante-obsessed readership of the time would welcome a translation of the treatise: "there seems to be so large an interest felt just now on the subject of Dante that I should think a well-made translation of the 'Convito' might sell fairly" (37). In this regard, a translation would have seemed desirable for Pater, as he appears to have had a deep knowledge only of Dante's more famous (and much translated) works, a detail which may suggest that his contact with the Italian poet may have been mediated by translation. Pater had some knowledge of Italian, but it is possible that he first approached and then continued to read Dante with the assistance of the numerous and popular nineteenth-century English translation of his works. Among the more recent translations of Dante, he had some reservations towards both the translation of the *Commedia* (1867) by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1807-1822) and that of 1851-1854 by the English linguist Charles Bagot Cayley (1823-1883), whereas he praised Dante Gabriel Rossetti's version of the *Vita Nova* included in *Early Italian Poets* (1861) and lamented that Rossetti had not applied his talent for translation also to the *Commedia*.<sup>3</sup> While he quotes the *Vita Nova* from Rossetti's trail-blazing volume, he quotes the *Commedia* from the exceptionally popular 1814 translation published by the writer Henry Francis Cary (1772-1844), a fact which may indicate that he read Dante primarily from that version.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Shadwell 1892, xxiv.

<sup>4</sup> For Cary and the other translators of the *Commedia* see Crisafulli 2000. For Cary see also Milbank 1998, 17-21.

Dante's considerable influence on Pater may have also had biographical reasons. Indeed, Pater's closest friend and literary executor Charles Lancelot Shadwell (1840-1919) was a scholar of Dante and one of the first members of the Oxford Dante Society, the second oldest Dante Society in the world.<sup>5</sup> A fellow and later Provost of Oriel College, Shadwell joined the Society in 1877, nearly a year after its foundation, and it was probably through him that Pater gained admittance in 1890. Shadwell and his research into Dante are also behind Pater's only essay entirely devoted to the Italian poet, the Introduction that he wrote for Shadwell's Marvell-inflected translation of the cantos I-XXVII of Dante's *Purgatory*, which was published in 1892 (as he explains in the "Preface" to the volume, Shadwell [1892, xi] decided not to publish the entire *cantica* on the ground that "the concluding six cantos ... constitute, from several points of view, a distinct section of the poem"). It was probably around the time he was writing the Introduction to Shadwell's book that Pater started working on another essay on Dante, which was to be left unfinished.<sup>6</sup> This essay survives as a manuscript fragment and is now held among the Walter Pater papers at Houghton Library, Harvard University. It has been recently digitised, which made it possible for me to make extensive use of it in this study.<sup>7</sup>

Given his reverence for Dante, Pater must have been antagonistic towards the negative criticism that the poet had attracted during the eighteenth century. On two different occasions, he openly contested Voltaire's caustic assertion in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) that Dante's "reputation will ever be on the increase, because he is so little read" (Pater 1980, 65) ("sa reputation s'affirmira toujours [...] parce qu'on ne le lit guère" [Pater 2010, 46; Shadwell 1892, xiii]). Pater quoted Voltaire's comment first in the essay "The Poetry of Michelangelo"—published in 1871 and shortly after collected in the seminal *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873)—and then, twenty years later, in his Introduction to Shadwell's *Purgatory*.<sup>8</sup> Strategically placed at the opening of the latter, Voltaire's passage furnishes Pater with the polemic target against which to formulate his own interpretation of Dante. As opposed to Dante's dramatic condition of neglect suggested by Voltaire, Pater's essay celebrates Dante as a universal poet, whose capacity to engage readers may vary, yet never falters throughout the centuries: "And withal Dante is a great poet, one of the greatest of poets, great like Sophocles and Shakespeare by a certain universality in his appeal to men's minds, and

<sup>5</sup> For Shadwell see Evans 1970, xxxvii-xxxviii and Straub 2009, 116-118.

<sup>6</sup> Both Evans 1970 and Straub (2008, par. 5; 2009, 112) date this fragment to 1892 on the grounds that it may be the mysterious "Dante article" which Pater makes reference to in a 1892 letter to Henry John Cockayne Cust (Evans 1970, 164).

<sup>7</sup> The fragment is visible on (and downloadable from)

[https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:45474392\\$359i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:45474392$359i) [accessed 20 February 2022]. I have transcribed all the passages quoted in my essay from this digitised copy. I have normalized and added punctuation to Pater's text for the sake of clarity.

<sup>8</sup> Pater inserted the quotation in French in the first two editions of *The Renaissance* (1873; 1877), but substituted it with an English translation starting with the third edition of the book (1888). He quoted again from the French original in the Introduction.

independent therefore of the special sensibilities of a particular age” (Shadwell 1892, xxiii).<sup>9</sup>

In light of Dante’s centrality in Pater’s thought, it is surprising how little critical material has been devoted to their relationship. Dante is generally only briefly mentioned in Pater scholarship, which often limits itself to gloss his references to the Italian poet that occur in his more dissected writings, and rarely focuses on less canonical Dante-related texts such as the Introduction and the Houghton Library fragment. By the same token, Pater has been rather neglected by specialists in the Anglophone reception of Dante. In Alison Milbank’s monograph on Dante and the Victorians (1998), the most recent book-length study devoted to the subject, Pater receives some attention, but Milbank’s account is far from comprehensive.<sup>10</sup> The only exception to this paucity of secondary sources are an article (2008) and a book chapter (2009) by Julia Straub (the latter a reworking of the former). Straub’s discussion of Pater’s reception of Dante is convincing and well-informed. However, due to her primary focus on the figure of Beatrice, her exploration of the more general questions raised by Pater’s reading of Dante is at times somewhat economical. By elaborating on her study, I will seek to tackle these questions from a broader perspective and in greater detail.

### A Great Poet, A Great Lover

Pater viewed the life and works of Dante as the emblem of physically felt and intense amorous feelings, the most representative expression of the overwhelming force and somatic dimension of the cultural and literary phenomenon known as courtly love. Indeed, when Pater discusses the sophisticated and passionate conception of erotic desire which informs much Medieval literature in Italy and France—a sentiment which he celebrates as an “ideal love” and invests with strong historical and aesthetic values (Pater 2010, 15)—Dante is often brought into play. In the essay *Aucassin and Nicolette*—which first appeared in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), and was then expanded and retitled *Two Early French Stories* in the later editions of the book—Pater remarks how the all-absorbing, sensual, and antinomian nature of courtly love is at the core of the more artistically significant passages of the titular tale, a mix of prose and verse in Old French which revolves around the vicissitudes of two young lovers from (seemingly) different backgrounds. Dante is evoked as the benchmark for the “ideal intensity of love” sung in the “profane poetry of the middle age” because he fully investigated (and experienced) the effects of love on his own vital faculties, recording how “the tyranny of that ‘Lord of terrible aspect’ became actually physical, blinding his senses and suspending his bodily forces” (Pater 2010, 10, 15). As in Dante, in the French story the tyrannical passion that consumes the young aristocrat Aucassin presents strong

<sup>9</sup> See Straub 2009, 113.

<sup>10</sup> See Milbank 1998, 1, 53-56.

bodily symptoms, to the point that, Pater observes, he “faints with love, as Dante fainted” (15).

Appropriately, Pater’s reference to the representation of love as an awful and destructive despot harks back to Dante’s *Vita Nova*, and in particular to the well-known episode from the initial paragraph in which the narrator recounts his dream of an especially gory personification of love. Both the colourfulness of the scene, where Love forces a half-naked and half-asleep Beatrice to feed on Dante’s heart, and Dante’s choice of words “Lord of terrible aspect,” which Pater quotes from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s translation, must have struck Pater as particularly expressive of the physicality he sought to emphasise in his philosophy in that he alluded to the same episode and quoted again the same expression in his Roman novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). At the beginning of Chapter 6, a turning point in the novel, the phrase is used to connote Marius’s reaction to his reading of Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, and especially to the story of Cupid and Psyche. To Marius’s eyes “The petulant, boyish Cupid was become more like that ‘Lord of terrible aspect’, who stood at Dante’s bedside and wept, or had at least grown to the manly earnestness of the *Erôs* of Praxiteles” (Pater 1985, 87). As Marius’s imagination morphs the puerile god of Apuleius into a “graver” (87) and more virile deity, the myth of Cupid and Psyche helps to shape his developing worldview, stirring in him the cult of a “perfect imaginative love” (87). One of the key principles of Pater’s thought, this “perfect” passion is an aestheticized obsession with the beauty of the “human body,” a pure, almost religious adoration for bodily forms which is “centered upon a type of beauty entirely flawless and clean” (87). In its mingling of carnality and spirituality, this ideal is not remote from Pater’s somatic reading of courtly love which I have mentioned above, and the shared model of Dante seems to testify to this similarity.

Intriguingly, Pater’s sensualisation of Dante, his fixation with Dante’s “worship of the body” (Pater 2010, 11), seems to have had a certain degree of influence on the fin-de-siècle reception of the Italian poet himself. For instance, George Bornstein (1988) has hypothesised that Yeats’s re-appreciation of Dante in the 1890s was moulded on Pater’s discussion of the Italian poet, and especially on his Introduction to Shadwell’s *Purgatory*. By the same token, Pater may help to explain a somewhat mysterious allusion in Chapter 11 of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; 1891), where the narrator remarks how Dorian Gray’s dandyish, homoerotic charm was particularly bewitching for “very young men” because “to them he seemed to be of the company of those whom Dante describes as having sought to ‘make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty’” (Wilde 2006, 110). Wilde’s quotation is apparently not from Dante and critics have not yet been able to locate its exact source. However, whether or not there is a source, the tone of the quotation is certainly reminiscent of Pater’s idea of Dante, and this connection is fostered by the fact that Wilde’s words echo an almost identical (and equally sibylline) passage from *Marius the Epicurean*, where a young priest of Aesculapius exhorts Marius to be “of the number of those who, in the words of a poet who came long after, must be ‘made perfect by the love of visible beauty’” (Pater 1985, 53). In this sense, Wilde may have read Marius through the lenses of Pater’s Dante and thus identified “the poet who came long

after” with Dante. Moreover, the possibility that Wilde’s passage may owe something to Pater’s aestheticist conception of Dante is also corroborated by the fact that Wilde goes on to quote Théophile Gautier’s claim that “he was one for whom ‘the visible world existed’” (53), a revolutionary aesthetic declaration which Pater himself appropriated and quoted in *Plato and Platonism* (1893).<sup>11</sup>

In “Aucassin and Nicolette” Pater’s reference to Dante’s fainting ‘with love’ may be reminiscent of two memorable passages of the *Commedia*, both of which are related to romantic passion, that is Dante’s ambiguous, much-debated reaction to hearing the tragic love story of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V, as well as his emotional breakdown after seeing Beatrice again in the Earthly Paradise and hearing her words of reproach (*Purgatorio* XXXI, ll. 64-90). However, as indicated by the fact that he directly quotes from Dante’s prosimetrum, Pater here certainly hints also at the destabilizing effects of desire represented in the *Vita Nova*, in which Dante the character/narrator loses consciousness several times, or goes through comparable states of mental and physical derangement, due to the action of love.<sup>12</sup> Following an Aristotelian and Galenic-inflected commonplace that is typical of the Italian poetry of the Stilnovo, this violent form of lovesickness is often visualized as the disruption of the speaker’s vital spirits, fairy-like entities which regulate cognition and sense perception, and whose activity is strongly undermined by the sight or the memory of the beloved. In his emphasis on the effects of love on Dante’s “senses” and “bodily forces,” Pater seems to have been receptive to this markedly embodied type of psychology, and he might have also been thinking of it in his Introduction to Shadwell’s translation of *Purgatory*, when he opines that Dante’s psychological introspection in the *Commedia*, his attention to the movements of our inner world (“the mental or spiritual ways of others”), reminds the reader that “he is also the poet of the *Vita Nuova*” (Shadwell 1892, xix). Moreover, Pater’s appreciation and use of the *Vita Nova*, as well as his concern with Dante’s idea of love more in general, are also indicative of a larger tendency in the Victorian reception of the Italian poet. As noted by several scholars, the Victorians were particularly attracted to Dante the love poet and the unfortunate lover of the *Vita Nova*, whose poetry and biography they variously assimilated to, or at least put in creative dialogue with, bourgeois, middle-class values of family, femininity, and romantic relationships.<sup>13</sup> This sentimental re-interpretation of Dante exploded after the alleged portrait of a young, seductive Dante by Giotto was discovered in Florence in 1840 as the result of a campaign partly financed by the Anglo-Florentine Seymour Kirkup (both the attribution of the painting to Giotto and the identification of the sitter with Dante have now been famously rejected). Pater seems to acknowledge both the momentousness of that portrait and the contemporary “Vita-

<sup>11</sup> See Pater 1974, 225. Gautier’s remark was reported by the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt in their *Journal* (written from 1850 to 1896). One may find almost identical formulations in Gautier’s influential novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835).

<sup>12</sup> See *Vita Nova* 1. 5-18; 7. 1-8 (where Dante practically passes out after seeing Beatrice); 14.

<sup>13</sup> For the Victorian reception of Dante see Milbank 1998, Ellis 1983, Cooksey 2003, Straub 2009. For the myth of Beatrice and the *Vita Nova* see Milbank 1998, especially 1-6, 102-161; Straub 2009; Straub 2012.

Nuov-ization” (Straub 2009, 206) of Dante when he speculates on the date of execution of “Giotto’s portrait of Dante the sweet singer of the *Vita Nova*” in his unfinished fragment on Dante (Houghton, f. 4). However, while Pater’s reading of Dante undoubtedly participated in the Victorian process of secularisation of the Italian poet, his association of Dante and his love poetry with fundamental questions related to sense perception, artistic form, and (cultural) history swerves away from contemporary moralising, ‘household’ appropriations of the Italian poet.

### Between Body and Soul

In the essay on “The Poetry of Michelangelo” Pater’s discussion of Michelangelo is mostly carried out by comparing him with Dante. Intriguingly, especially in light of what I have pointed out above, one of the common points between Dante and Michelangelo lies in their poetic treatment of love. In Pater’s view, Michelangelo “learns from Dante rather than from Plato, that for lovers, the surfeiting of desire ... is a state less happy than misery full of hope” (Pater 2010, 50); on a more textual level, Michelangelo resembles Dante “in the repetition of the words *gentile* and *cortesia*, in the personification of *Amor*” and, most importantly here, “in the tendency to dwell minutely on the physical effects of the presence of a beloved object on the pulses and the heart” (50). And yet, although Michelangelo shares Dante’s bodily idea of love and carefully describes its effects on the senses, many aspects of his Platonizing poetics are antipodal to Dante, Pater argues. Albeit somewhat obliquely, Pater seems to contrast Michelangelo’s tension toward abstractness and “unseen beauty” (49), which results in metamorphic elemental imagery, with the low-relief stability and verbal richness of the poetic and narrative structure of Dante’s *Vita Nova*, which Pater defines as “a piece of figured work inlaid with incidents” (48-49). Whether or not one agrees with Pater’s rather opaque assessment, his use of terms related to art (“figured,” “inlaid with”) is particularly significant and offers clues about his overall interpretation of Dante.

Dante’s realism is a long-ingrained, much-vexed critical notion: throughout the centuries, the readers of Dante’s works, and especially of the *Commedia*, have reacted to and therefore tried to explain this quality of his verse in myriad ways.<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of the comprehensive definition that one may want to give to this multi-layered concept, there is no doubt that one of its fundamental constituents is the unprecedented and unparalleled capacity of Dante’s language of reproducing, with extreme concision, the essential details of outer and inner reality in all their emotional and sensorial vividness. For its painterly energy, microscopic precision, and haptic concreteness, this unmistakable virtue of Dante’s verse—which almost amounts to an effect of reality—has been often explicated by drawing a parallel between Dante’s language and other, more material, forms of artistic representation. As is well known, Dante himself somewhat

<sup>14</sup> For Dante’s realism see chiefly Barolini 1992; Barolini 2013.

encouraged this analogy when he expatiated, poetically, on the ‘visibile parlare’ and the cross-fertilization between the senses and different artistic media in *Purgatorio* X-XII (it should be noted, however, that the works of art depicted in those cantos are made by God and therefore attain a level of perfection unreachable by humankind).<sup>15</sup>

Twentieth century poets and scholars such as T. S. Eliot, Erich Auerbach, and Charles Singleton were very keen on attempting a systematic explanation of Dante’s realism, but this aspect of his poetry was much debated also by their Romantic and Victorian predecessors, who often saw it through the lenses of its sensorial and interartistic implications. For instance, the translator Henry Francis Cary remarked that Dante was the poet who “has afforded more lessons to the statuary and the painter, in the variety of objects they represent, and in the accuracy and spirit with which they are brought before the eye” (Milbank 1998, 20-21). Dante’s descriptive accuracy was also praised by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, however, like Cary, had some reservations about Dante’s indulgence in grotesqueness and corporality (Milbank 1998, 21). The historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), who was well-versed in Italian literature, lauded in his important 1824 article on Dante the “consistency,” “minuteness,” and unmatched conciseness of Dante’s style as well as “the earnestness with which he labours to make the reader understand the exact shape and size of everything that he describes” (Macaulay 1860, 62, 71).<sup>16</sup> In an equally influential essay on Milton published the year after, Macaulay juxtaposes Milton’s visionary sublimity to Dante and remarks how the latter “gives us the shape, the size, the colour, the sound, the smell, the taste” (Milbank 1998, 25). Closer to Pater’s time, John Ruskin revered Dante and wrote at length on him in many of his works, to the point that he even provided the reader with detailed descriptions of the landscape of Dante’s hereafter in *Modern Painters* III (1856). Owing to Dante’s graphic style and his combination of realism and transcendence, Ruskin considered him more a visual artist than a poet, and regarded the *Commedia* as a pictorial poem.<sup>17</sup> In his *Introduction to the Study of Dante* (1872), Pater’s contemporary the poet and historian of the Renaissance John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) maintains that Dante’s “grotesqueness is the result of realism, rejecting nothing so long as it suited to express an idea” and that “Dante will be definite at any cost; he will be striking and pregnant” (Symonds 1893, 224).

As suggested by his use of artistic vocabulary to describe the *Vita Nova* in the essay on Michelangelo, Pater too was appreciative of the visual, ‘sensorial’ dimension of Dante’s verse. Indeed, it was almost inevitable that Dante’s perceptual intensity should be formative for a system of thought such as Pater’s, which delves deeply into questions such as intermediality, the sensual origin of artistic creativity and judgement, and the representational possibilities of language. In this sense, it is emblematic that Leigh Hunt’s assessment that Dante “writes things instead of words” (Milbank 1998, 22) is fascinatingly close (although not identical) to Pater’s manifesto claim in *Marius the*

<sup>15</sup> See Barolini 1992, 122-142.

<sup>16</sup> For Macaulay and Dante see Milbank 1998, 24-28.

<sup>17</sup> See Milbank 1998, 29-44.

*Epicurean* that “words should be indeed things” (Pater 1985, 122). Tantalizing though they seem, similarities such as this are very general and in large part incidental. However, even though they cannot be taken as a testimony to direct intertextual influence, they indicate a certain degree of consonance between Pater’s aesthetics and some aspects of Dante’s poetics (and reception). Their significance is corroborated by the fact that several of Pater’s works directly tackle the question of Dante’s realism. In his essay on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, first published in 1883 and then collected in *Appreciations* (1889), Pater (1974, 200-201) likens the “definiteness of sensible imagery” of Rossetti’s poem “The Blessed Damozel” to Dante and “those early painters” of Dante’s time, and concludes that, besides their visionary subject-matter, the two poets share the same poetic principles of “particularisation” and “concrete definition.” In his Introduction to Shadwell’s *Purgatory* Pater points out that “Dante’s minuteness of touch” resembles “miniature painting,” and goes on to quote Dante’s memorable line about the art of miniature and its flourishing in Paris from *Purgatorio* XI (“*Ch’alluminare è chiamata in Parisi*” [Shadwell 1892, xviii; sic]), to which he alludes also at the beginning of “Aucassin and Nicolette” (Pater 2010, 9). When he discusses the difficulties in translating Dante’s vocabulary, he explicitly defines Dante as “so minute a ‘realist’” (Shadwell 1892, xxv). In his use of the adjective to indicate “close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation,” or the artistic rendering of “the precise details of the real thing or scene” Pater follows a tradition that, according to the *OED*, goes back to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, it is important to note that this sense of the word was certainly widespread, yet comparatively recent at Pater’s time, a detail which is particularly interesting because, as we shall see below, Pater’s notion of realism is profoundly connected with modernity.

Dante’s realism is also at the core of Pater’s fragment on the Italian poet, in which it is linked to what may be regarded as the main point of the text, that is Dante’s idea of art and his relationship with contemporary (Gothic) art and artists. Elaborating on a long-established critical terminology, Pater remarks that Dante’s poetry—especially in “the episode of the Earthly Paradise”—seems to be made of “coloured phrases” and “written pictures ... of life and nature,” linguistic elements that are so vivid as to appear “ready-made for the hand of the artist,” closer to images than to words (Houghton, f. 5). Pater’s interartistic approach to Dante is structural to the entire fragment. Pater illustrates Dante’s definition of human art (“*l’arte vostra*” meaning “crafts” in general and not merely “arts”) in *Inferno* XI, according to which, if nature is the product of the mind of God, and the works of men (including art) imitate nature, human art may therefore be viewed as “God’s grand-daughter” (f. 5). (Interestingly, in this point Pater is rather rigorous in that he inserts a superscript with the canto and line number and specifies that Dante refers chiefly to “practical” arts, even though he “might have admitted” that “creative arts” too are “derived immediately from nature” [f. 5].) The fragment mentions also the episode from the *Vita Nova* (23. 1-4) in which Dante is absorbed in drawing

<sup>18</sup> *OED*, ‘realism’, item 4a.

angels and reads it as an example of how contemporary art influenced Dante, of how, in Pater's words, "Dante comes very close to the fine art of his time, rich and rigorous and innovating as it was," of how "the devotion to fine art which was so large an element in the mental atmosphere of his time was strong upon him too" (ff. 4-5). In exploring Dante's connection with visual art, Pater focuses especially on his reported friendship with Giotto. He recounts the popular anecdote about Dante and Giotto's children, which first appeared in Benvenuto da Imola's commentary to Dante's allusion to Giotto in *Purgatorio* XI.<sup>19</sup> According to this story, Dante was surprised by the rustic, plain appearance of Giotto's children, which caused him to exclaim to his friend that it is was preposterous that such an accomplished creator of handsome figures like him should have begotten so unattractive children. To him Giotto wittily replied that he painted in daylight, whereas, to use Pater's words, the "faces" of his children were "begotten in the dark" (f. 2). Moreover, and most importantly here, Pater's fragment draws analogies between Dante's and Giotto's different means of artistic expression. Pater speculates on how Giotto's frescoes in Assisi might have been inspired by Dante's treatment of St. Francis' "mystical marriage to Poverty" (f. 3), and remarks that Giotto's works are "not less eloquent than Dante's poetry of beauty and holiness" (f. 2). The fragment points out how Giotto's paintings are, at least in some respects, not inferior to Dante's verse, but elsewhere Pater claims that the representational, aesthetic power of Dante's words overpasses contemporary visual art. In the essay on Botticelli, first published in 1870 and then collected in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Giotto and the other artists of Dante's time are deemed inadequate to illustrate the *Divina Commedia* because they cannot emulate the special significance that Dante gives to sensible objects, thus failing to reproduce the complexity of his realism: "Giotto and the followers of Giotto, with their almost childish religious aim, had not learned to put that weight of meaning into outward things, light, colour, every-day gesture, which the poetry of the 'Divine Comedy' involves" (Pater 2010, 30).

Pater (2010, 31) opines that the first illustrator to pay justice to the *Commedia* was Botticelli because, like Dante, he was able to combine naturalism and "visionariness." Extremely sensitive to "outward things" (30), Botticelli bejewelled his works with detailed depictions of the natural world; yet, at the same time, he had a tendency to treat the "data" apprehended by sense perception as "the exponents of ideas, moods, visions" of his own interiority (31). If to Botticelli, "as to Dante, the scene, the colour, the outward image or gesture, comes with all its incisive and importunate reality," in Botticelli's and Dante's art sensorial profusion is not merely an end in itself, but functions also as the embodiment ("the double or repetition") of the feelings that it "awakes" in the artist's mind (31). In other words, in both Dante and Botticelli, Pater argues, sensible objects are always charged with subjective, if not symbolical, values. Botticelli's and Dante's similar mode of selecting and using sensations to represent outer and inner reality, their common type of realism, as it were, on the one hand fleshes out the invisible by moulding

<sup>19</sup> For this anecdote see Pantone 2014.

the intellectual (and the sentimental) into sensual form, on the other hand etherealises physicality by infusing it with psycho-cognitive meaning. It is by virtue of this visionary realism that in Botticelli's and, most importantly, in Dante's works what is internal (or spiritual) and what is external (or material) practically merge.

As is well known, this fusion of sensuousness and spirituality, body and soul, is totemic for Pater's system of thought. It constitutes the basis of his definition of art—or, at least, of “good art,” as he specifies in the essay on “Style” (Pater 1974, 122)—and the rises and falls of this “artistic ideal” (Pater 2010, 127) over the course of time may be interpreted as one of the parameters that regulate his aestheticized narrative of (cultural) history. I shall return in due course to the historical implications of this principle, which Pater famously referred to as a “musical law” (127) because it is modelled on the perfect unity of form and content that is characteristic of music.<sup>20</sup> It suffices here to remark that Pater repeatedly points out Dante as one of the key examples of this ideal and therefore implicitly values the Italian poet as an antecedent of vital components of his own aesthetics. By the same token, Pater often mentions Dante as the touchstone for other artists who, either before or after him, sought to achieve a similar aesthetic condition. In the essay on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a dyed-in-the-wool follower of Dante, Pater dwells on his theory of the intermingling between “matter” and “spirit” in order to better explain the physical aspects of Rossetti's conception of beauty and love. Dante has once again a prominent place in this discussion:

And yet, again as with Dante, to speak of his ideal type of beauty as material, is partly misleading. Spirit and matter, indeed, have been for the most part opposed, with a false contrast or antagonism, by schoolmen, whose artificial creation those abstractions really are. In our actual concrete experience, the two trains of phenomena which the words *matter* and *spirit* do but roughly distinguish, play inextricably into each other. Practically, the church of the Middle Age by its aesthetic worship, its sacramentalism, its real faith in the resurrection of the flesh, had set itself against that Manichean opposition of spirit and matter, and its results in men's way of taking life; and in this, Dante is the central representative of its spirit. To him, in the vehement and impassioned heat of his conceptions, the material and the spiritual are fused and blent: if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity. (Pater 1974, 203)

The operation described above, which fixes spirituality into the tangible shape of a crystal while purifying corporality, enables the coalescence of opposites and is therefore propelled by some type of analogy, whether at a conceptual or linguistic level. In other words, Pater seems to say that Dante's verse—which he sees as an actualisation of his own artistic ideal—unifies “the material” and “the spiritual” thanks to the combined action of rich sensorial imagery (“particularisation”) and metaphorical structures (“visionariness”). Given the central role played by various forms of metaphor such as allegory, figurality, and/or typology in Dante's works, and especially in the *Commedia*, one could be tempted to liken the process of unification that is characteristic of Pater's

---

<sup>20</sup> I am quoting from Pater's frequently cited essay “The School of Giorgione,” first published in 1877 and then included, in a slightly edited form, in the third edition of *The Renaissance* (1888).

Dante to typological, allegorical or figural strategies, especially since they are, like Pater's process, ultimately based on analogy.<sup>21</sup> Yet, it is important to remark that Pater's reading of Dante is decidedly not allegorical (or figural), at least not in the traditional sense. Indeed, although it connects two seemingly different planes of reality, Pater's very concept of the blending between matter and spirit is remote from typological systems. If in traditional allegory or typology earthly and transcendent beings are united via analogical devices, such as prefiguration and conventionality, which usually preserve the distinctness of the entities analogised, what Pater's process aims to achieve is precisely to blur this distinctness, and lead to unity and novelty. Admittedly, the notion of "type" is pivotal to Pater's thought, as persuasively explained by Carolyn Williams (1989, 123-142), but this centrality is here immaterial in that Pater deploys that notion mainly as a means of historical or aesthetic classification: his use of it pertains to the interpretation of recursive patterns in history, myth, or artistic configurations, and is therefore closer to "typification" (Williams 1989, 131) rather than typology proper. Moreover, even if one may go as far as to admit the presence of a strongly secularised form of typology in Pater, it would be misleading to read his idea of the fusion of matter and form typologically because this fusion represents not a consequence of, but one of the conditions for the existence of Paterian types.

While the unique realism of Pater's Dante cannot be explained in terms of allegory, it may be usefully defined as 'symbolical'. By using this adjective, I refer not merely to the notion of a thing representing or standing for something else—a general concept that can apply to all forms of analogy, allegory included—but to the specific late-eighteenth century and nineteenth century idea(s) of the symbol, a much-debated and tremendously complex set of theories which were paramount both for Pater and, most importantly here, for Pater's interpretation of Dante.<sup>22</sup> This massive amount of theorization on the symbol was a transnational phenomenon which first originated in Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and was fully developed by Romantic or Romantic-related figures such as Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, as well as, in England, Coleridge and the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867), spreading through the artistic, philosophical, and literary discourse well into the second half of the nineteenth century, and preparing the ground for the emergence of innovative conceptions of literature, the arts, consciousness, and the body. Just as late-eighteenth century and early nineteenth century aesthetics are as numerous as they are various and, at times, conflicting, so "the post-Kantian symbol-concepts," which have frequently been analysed as the main issue of those aesthetics, "involve very different arguments and cannot be easily assimilated to one another" (Hühn and Vigus 2013, 6). For all their variety, however, all these theories of the symbol may be viewed as serving the same primary aesthetic and cognitive function. Indeed, all (post-)Kantian poetics and systems of thought were concerned with exploring the relationship between cognition, sensation, and creativity, and, as part of a general

<sup>21</sup> For Dante and allegory see Freccero 2007; Martinez 2010; Kriesel 2019.

<sup>22</sup> My discussion of post-Kantian symbolism is mainly based on the recent collection of essays Hühn and Vigus 2013, and Halmi 2007.

emphasis on imagination and intuition, they often developed the concept of the symbol as a modality of the imagination that is instrumental in connecting the mind and the senses, abstraction and concreteness. In this sense, post-Kantian symbols are generally understood as having at least one of these characteristics: they can be sensuous, embodied, non-discursive, rich in meaning (polysemous), self-referential, indirect, creative, intuitive, and, by virtue of these features, capable of *being* at the same time (and therefore of unifying) opposite things, the particular and the universal, the temporal and the eternal, subjectivity and objectivity. Interestingly, even though it is multifaceted and at times rather ambiguous, and presents much terminological and conceptual overlapping with previous analogical systems such as allegory itself, this new type of symbolism was often theorized in opposition to the notion of allegory, especially as exemplified by the highly codified allegories of eighteenth-century literature. In promoting the symbol as a synthesising, original, and sense-related mode of thought and creation, Coleridge and others disparaged allegory as artificial, standardized, and coldly intellectual. (I shall not here tackle the fiendishly difficult question of whether and to what extent symbol theory corresponded to a new poetic symbolism as it is not relevant to Pater's reception and discussion of Dante.)

All the pivotal phases of this redefinition of symbolism—late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century German philosophy and literary culture (from Winckelmann to Hegel), English and French Romanticism, as well as Anglophone and French post-Romanticism—had an enormous influence on Pater, and it is therefore no wonder that the (post-)Kantian theorization on the symbol contributed to moulding key elements of Pater's aesthetics, such as curiosity, strangeness, embodiment, and the fusion of the outer and inner (even the name of the psycho-cognitive faculty that Pater links to this ideal blending, the “imaginative reason,” harks back to Matthew Arnold's discussion of questions related to Romanticism and modernity, and may bear some trace of Kant's philosophy).<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, Pater's amalgamation of physicality and spirituality may be regarded as a materialistic, decidedly sensual reworking of the consubstantiality of opposites that is typical of post-Kantian (and especially Coleridge or Schelling-inflected) symbolism, and may therefore be treated as a symbolical operation. So, even though Pater learnt from his Romantic models also their terminological ambiguity and often used words such as ‘allegory’, ‘symbolism’, and related terms interchangeably, one could say that his idea of Dante's union of realism and subjectivity may be seen as a development of Romantic and post-Romantic symbol theories.<sup>24</sup> It is in this sense that,

<sup>23</sup> Pater 1980, 102, 385-386. Pater uses this expression both in the essay on Giorgione and in the first version of the essay on Wordsworth, published in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1874. For Pater and mid-eighteenth-century-to-early-nineteenth century German thought see Hext 2013, 44-63; Østermark-Johansen 2011, 71-111; McGrath 1986. For Pater and Romanticism see chiefly Daley 2001; Conlon 1982; Evangelista 2002; for Pater and post-Romanticism see Conlon 1982; McGrath 1986; Clements 1985, 77-139; and Østermark-Johansen 2011, 113-211.

<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of “The School of Giorgione” Pater uses the word “symbol” in a rather (post-)Kantian sense, when he defines the imaginative reason as the faculty which unifies every “thought or feeling” with its “sensible analogue or symbol” (Pater 1980, 109). Elsewhere Pater deploys this word and its derivatives more loosely to indicate the presence of a metaphorical or analogical process.

in my opinion, one could use terms such as ‘symbolic’ and ‘symbolism’ to refer both to Pater’s aesthetics and, what matters most here, to his reading of Dante.

At least on one notable occasion, Pater openly reveals his indebtedness to the Romantic discussion of the symbol and contrasts allegory with the Hellenising, sensuous, and sceptical type of symbolism (or rather realism?) that he posits at the core of artistic representation. (Given their simultaneous emphasis on haptic materiality and formalist polysemy, theories such as Pater’s seem almost to conflate the notions of realism and symbolism.) In the essay on Winckelmann, Pater’s second published essay (1867) later included in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the Venus of Melos is preferred to both Beato Angelico’s figures and the Ephesian Diana because it better accomplishes the identification of matter and form. In this piece of sculpture, Pater argues, the spiritual “motive is not lightly or loosely attached to the sensuous form, as the meaning to the allegory, but saturates and is identical with it” (Pater 2010, 102). In light of such polarity between allegory and the symbol-like “sensuous form,” it is easy to understand that, when Pater remarks, in the essay on Michelangelo, that “For Dante, the amiable and devout materialism of the Middle Age sanctifies all that is presented by hand or eye” (Pater 2010, 49), he is not alluding to a figural, typological strategy, but referring to a consecration of sensorial stimulation on account of its epistemic (and therefore spiritual) significance, to a form of “aesthetic worship” even in divine matters. In this almost paradoxical view of medieval culture—where “devout” strangely collocates with “materialism”—sensuality can be elevated to godliness.

The divergence between Pater’s aestheticism and allegorical exegesis is particularly significant in relation to Dante, not only because much modern scholarship has unequivocally shown that in fact there *are* allegorical procedures operating in Dante’s works, but also because the allegorical or typological nature of Dante’s poetry, as well as the concept of typology in general, were much debated in the early-to-mid nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Although their rejection of allegory was often as strong as it was ambivalent, some Romantic writers such as the German August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845) and Coleridge applied their critique of allegorical modes to their interpretation of Dante’s works, whose allegorical features they frequently took pains to dismiss.<sup>26</sup> This tendency persisted in English literary culture well into the following decades, where, however, it was in some cases mitigated by the renewed interest in typology that emerged in the 1830s (an event which, if possible, caused even more confusion and superimposition between the uses of terms such as ‘allegory’ or ‘symbolism’). For instance, writers and poets such as Ruskin, and Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti—who were all conversant with scriptural typology—frequently re-appropriated Dante from the angle of their personal search for what may be seen as original forms of allegorical analogy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For Victorian typology see Landow 1980; Hönnighausen 1988, 1-82; and, with reference to Dante, Milbank 1998, 29-44, 102-149.

<sup>26</sup> See Milbank 1998, 121-122. For Coleridge see Halmi 2009.

<sup>27</sup> For Ruskin see Landow 1980 and Milbank 1998, 29-44. For the Rossettis see Tinkler-Villani 2004; Straub 2009, 37-73; Maxwell 1993; Hönnighausen 1972.

Other writers, like Pater or, according to Milbank (1998, 103), Matthew Arnold, seemed to adhere more fully to the Romantic dichotomy between symbol and allegory—at least as far as Dante was concerned—and had no qualms at playing down what today may be considered as the allegorical dimension of Dante’s *oeuvre*. An important example of this suspicion towards Dantesque allegory is that formulated by Tennyson’s much-mourned friend Arthur Henry Hallam (1811-1833), who, in commenting on the overly typological analysis of the *Commedia* carried out by the critic Gabriele Rossetti (1783-1854), concludes in a rather Paterian fashion that in Dante “form and spirit are one” (Milbank 1998, 121). In this sense, it comes as no surprise that Hallam, who promulgated an influential post-Romantic theory of poetry centred on the senses, predated a central point of Pater’s sensuous reading of Dante.

Pater explicitly links Dante to his ideal of the fusion of matter and spirit also in his later book *Plato and Platonism* (1893). Indeed, in Chapter 6 (“The Genius of Plato”), he explains the strong sensuousness (the “exquisite culture of the senses”) of Plato’s philosophy by recycling the same crystal-related turns of phrase and imagery which he had deployed in relation to Dante a decade before in his essay on Rossetti (Pater 1974, 230). Plato’s intimacy with “the sensible world” originates from an impassioned, almost physical, feeling of love (“he is a lover, a great lover, somewhat after the manner of Dante”): it is this amorous desire, this erotic appreciation of sensible things, that prompts both his and Dante’s cognitive and artistic merging of opposites (230). Dante’s unique focus on sense perception, whose nature and relationship with a specific idea of love I have discussed above, is called into play also in a previous chapter of Pater’s book, in which Plato’s sensorial rendering of the afterlife is analogised to Dante’s. An indication of how Plato’s “extremely visual fancy” could morph rather discarnate concepts such as the hereafter and the transmigration of souls into a “matter of very lively and presentable form and colour” (Pater 1893, 69), the Myth of Er recounted in the final part of Plato’s *Republic* resembles Dante’s visionary experience, Pater argues, especially in the depiction of the celestial world. Both Plato and Dante succeeded in injecting sensuality into spirituality, an artistic accomplishment which makes natural radiation and sacral radiance nearly indistinguishable. Plato’s Paradise is represented “with a quite Dantesque sensibility to coloured light—physical light or spiritual, you can hardly tell which, so perfectly is the inward sense blent with its visible counter-part, reminding one forcibly of the *Divine Comedy*, of which those closing pages of *The Republic* suggest an early outline” (69).

While the pervasiveness and importance of luminous images in Dante’s *Paradiso* have long been noted by both scholars and lay readers, the aspect of this heavenly light which Pater, in line with his aesthetics, mostly emphasises is its being at once physical and spiritual. More in general, as pointed out by Julia Straub (2008, par. 19; 2009, 119-127), Pater seems to have been drawn to Dante’s use of light imagery, which he alludes to in various texts. (This attraction is hardly surprising since Dante’s representation of luminosity was influential for many writers and poets who were formative for Pater, such

as Percy Bysshe Shelley.)<sup>28</sup> If *Plato and Platonism* refers to the brilliance of Paradise, a passage from “Winckelmann” discussed by Straub draws on the elegiac light of Purgatory to envisage the effect on Winckelmann of his “first years in Rome” (Pater 2010, 93).<sup>29</sup> Just as Dante creeps out of the darkness of Hell into the atmospheric purity of Purgatory and “is filled with a sharp and joyful sense of light” (93) that brings in ‘a moment of moral and metaphysical clarification and elevation’ (Straub 2008, par. 19), so Winckelmann—who came to Italy from the cultural obscurantism of Germany—experienced a similar intellectual and aesthetic illumination from his close contact with antiquity (“which is pre-eminently intellectual light”; Pater 2010, 93).

As remarked by Straub (2009, 118-129), Pater’s focus on Dante’s light imagery also characterizes his idiosyncratic use of the figure of Beatrice. In this respect, Pater’s connection between Beatrice and luminosity may seem hardly innovative. Like other female figures sung in Italian poetry of Dante’s time and thereafter, in the *Vita Nova* and, even more so, in the *Commedia* Beatrice is idealised as a luminous, sacral, apparition, with beaming eyes and a beatific aura (indeed, her memorable representation contributed to cementing the epiphany of radiant, sanctified women as a structural motif of European love poetry). Moreover, the coruscating sanctity of Beatrice, as well as several other social, political, and sentimental aspects of her persona, were right at the centre of Victorian cultural discourse during Pater’s time.<sup>30</sup> From Ruskin to William Gladstone, from George Eliot to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Victorians were absolutely obsessed with Beatrice, to the point that her “function and status ... and the question of whether she was a real, historical figure or an allegory, became one of the most important aspects of the Victorian reception of Dante” (Straub 2008, par. 1). Despite (or perhaps owing to) such a complex reception, Pater managed to re-interpret Beatrice and her radiance from the perspective of his theoretical agenda. In his earliest surviving essay “Diaphaneité,” read as a paper at the Oxford University’s Old Mortality Society in 1864 and published posthumously by Shadwell, “the supreme moral charm in the Beatrice of the *Commedia*” is the first of several analogues that Pater (2014, 77) provides as a way of illustrating the singular “type of character” he advocates in the text.<sup>31</sup> Because of her moral and ontological superiority, which gives her agency and intellectual authority in the poem, Beatrice is suited to symbolising the type of subjectivity described by Pater, which is innocent and submissive, and yet, precisely because of its ineffectual purity (or rather “transparency”), truly revolutionary. Just as Beatrice can come to Dante’s aid and alter his fate by virtue of her higher state, so the diaphanous personality can be the vehicle of historical and cultural change due to its “paradoxical union of sheer passivity with ‘unconscious activity’” (Williams 1989, 179). As hinted above, Pater’s analogy between Beatrice and his “transparent hero” (173) is also based on their common luminousness. Immediately after his reference to Beatrice, Pater (2014, 77) observes that the

<sup>28</sup> For Shelley and Pater see Maxwell 2012.

<sup>29</sup> This passage is analysed in Straub 2009, 119-120.

<sup>30</sup> See Milbank 1998, 102-116; Straub, 20120; Straub 2009, 1-37.

<sup>31</sup> See Straub 2009, 118-121.

diaphanous individuality captivates the world with its “fine edge of light,” and, as if sprung from that passage, similar images of luminosity infuse the entire essay. Like Beatrice, diaphanous types are enveloped with supernatural light, as is suggested by the very term chosen to describe them (the titular “Diaphaneité”). In this sense, one may argue that the paradisiac glow of Beatrice may help to elucidate the enigmatic light-related title of the essay—a word which is probably Pater’s own coinage and has been interpreted in various ways.<sup>32</sup> The significance of this Dantesque undertone is bolstered by the fact that Pater (81) calls his hero a “clear crystal nature,” thus deploying the metaphor of the crystal which he develops, in relation to Dante, in his later essays.

### Across the Ages, Towards Modernity

In his fragment on Dante, Pater hints at the “remorseless law of changing taste” (Houghton, f. 2) that is expounded in *Purgatorio* XI in relation to Giotto’s fame. If Pater’s allusion is clear, his reading of Dante’s poem is here particularly idiosyncratic. Indeed, Dante’s much-dissected virtuoso passage (ll. 91-108) does not refer specifically to how fast artistic judgement mutates historically and socially, but, more broadly, denounces the ephemerality of one’s artistic supremacy in order to chastise human pride. In this sense, Pater is here once again secularizing Dante, reading his religiously-informed admonishment from a modern historical and aesthetic perspective. However, even though he shifts its focus away from the Christian idea of vanity towards a form of cultural relativism, the fact that Pater chooses to highlight this passage is symptomatic. In Pater’s view, Dante is not merely a pioneer of important aspects of his aesthetics but is also instrumental in triggering some of the cultural-historical revolutions, the moments of “changing taste,” as it were, which his system of thought sets out to describe.

For his innovative exaltation of sensuality, as well as his visionary realism that blends outer and inner reality, Dante played a key role in the epochal change that Pater identifies with the Renaissance.<sup>33</sup> As he explains at the beginning of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater does not limit the notion of the Renaissance to the “revival of classical antiquity” (Pater 2010, 10) which flourished in Italy from the late fourteenth century, but analyses it as a much more complex phenomenon, that is the progressive emergence of a new, humanistic worldview. Of this new set of beliefs, which is animated by a sense of intellectual and imaginative freedom and dignity, by “the love of the things of the intellect and imagination for their own sake” (10), Pater retraces the origins to the end of the High Middle Age, more particularly to late-twelfth and early thirteenth century

<sup>32</sup> A recent discussion of Pater’s text and its title is in Lene Østermark-Johansen’s Introduction to her edition of Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* (Pater 2014, 13-17, especially 15). See also Varty 1991 and Williams 1989, 172-174.

<sup>33</sup> For Pater’s idea of the Renaissance see chiefly Østermark-Johansen 2011, 15-69; Bullen 1994, chap. 12; Barolsky 1987.

France. What he terms the “mediæval Renaissance” comes thus to designate “the assertion of the liberty of the heart in the middle age” and is characterised by hostility towards the oppressive religious and moral dogmas of the time, by the centrality of the “pleasures of the senses and the imagination,” and by the cultivation of physical and artistic beauty (16). Best exemplified by Provençal poetry and its “magnificent aftergrowth ... in Italy and France” (10), this medieval cultural rebirth, Pater argues, anticipates and lays the ground for the Hellenism of the following centuries. Dante, who fed on the French and Italian roots of the Renaissance, brought the characteristics of this phenomenon to the utmost and therefore became “the central expression and type” (15) of that cultural, historical, and artistic renovation. As a testimony to his momentousness, references or allusions to Dante are pervasive in *The Renaissance*. To give a measure of this omnipresence, it suffices to observe that Dante is either mentioned or discussed in six out of the nine essays included in the 1893 edition of the book (excluding the “Preface” and “Conclusion”).

Despite (or perhaps owing to) Dante’s contribution to the episteme of the Renaissance, Pater praises the *Divine Comedy* as the “peculiar and perfect flower of the Middle Age” in the Introduction to Shadwell’s *Purgatory* (Shadwell 1892, xxvi). A similar focus on the medieval dimension of Dante is also in his fragment on the Italian poet. The fragment opens with a quotation of the first line of Cary’s popular translation of the *Commedia* and uses this passage to articulate Pater’s reading of a key moment in the history of (medieval) art: “‘The midway of this our mortal life’, Dante’s thirtieth year, is the year 1300, a great year, a turning-point, in the history of the arts” (Houghton, f. 1). While he misreads Dante’s allusion to his age (since Dante was undisputedly thirty-five and not thirty in 1300, when he began his journey through the afterlife), Pater adroitly deploys the image of the “midway” as a means of introducing his account of how, at the turn of the century, phenomena such as the influence of Gothic art on Italian architecture and the rise of Giotto profoundly altered the artistic landscape of Italy (and Europe). Moreover, by presenting these pivotal events from the angle of Dante’s poetic narrative, Pater is inextricably knitting together Dante and contemporary visual art. In this regard, because of its link with medieval artistic culture, Pater’s celebration of Dante as the “central embodiment” of the “spirit”—a very Paterian term—of the Middle Age (Shadwell 1892, xiii) may be reminiscent of Ruskin’s discussion of Dante in *Modern Painters* II-V (1846-1860) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853). Intriguingly, as noticed by Straub (2009, 112, 150), a passage from the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853) tackles many of the questions explored by Pater in his fragment, whose opening sentence it closely echoes:

I have above said, that all great European art is rooted in the thirteenth century; and it seems to me that there is a kind of central year about which we may consider the energy of the Middle Ages to be gathered; a kind of focus of time, which, by what is to my mind a most touching and impressive Divine appointment, has been marked for us by the greatest writer of the Middle Ages, in the first words he utters; namely, the year 1300, the “mezzo del cammin” of the life of Dante. Now, therefore, to Giotto,

the contemporary of Dante, and who drew Dante's still existing portrait in this very year, 1300, we may always look for the central mediæval idea in any subject. (Ruskin 1904, 400)

This passage almost undoubtedly testifies to Pater's familiarity with, if not direct use of, Ruskin's text.<sup>34</sup> And yet, although both Ruskin and Pater give Dante a central role in the development of medieval culture and Gothic art, their readings of the Italian poet diverge in many respects. While Pater views Dante as the apex of the medieval phase of the Renaissance, Ruskin (1904, 187) glorifies him as the emblem of an ideal, harmonious perfection of the human faculties ("the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral, and intellectual faculties, all at their highest"), a quintessentially medieval condition which Ruskin contrasts with the sociocultural decadence linked to the degeneration of Gothic art and the advent of the Renaissance. In this sense, it is indicative that, even though it suggests a connection between Pater and Ruskin, the passage from *The Stones of Venice* quoted above is nevertheless underpinned by a rather anti-Paterian opposition between the Middle Age and the Renaissance. Indeed, immediately after his canonisation of Dante and Giotto as the most representative medieval artists, in this section Ruskin goes on to unfavourably compare the typical Renaissance depiction of Cupid to that of Giotto. The divergence between the two iconographies is revealing: "there is not any minor circumstance more indicative of the *intense* difference between the mediæval and the Renaissance spirit, than the mode in which this god is represented" (Ruskin 1904, 400). If Pater's secularising interpretation of Dante points towards the Renaissance and modernity more in general—the year 1300 is a "turning-point," the beginning of a new era—Ruskin's reading is nostalgic, retrospective, and religiously-informed.

Further evidence that Pater associated Dante with the Renaissance is offered by his interest in Dante's special type of Hellenism. Perhaps elaborating on previous critical assertions such as Macaulay's claim that Dante was the only modern poet to successfully incorporate pagan mythology into Christian theology (Macaulay 1860, 69), Pater remarks that in the *Divine Comedy* there is a perfect coexistence of classical literary culture and Christian religion. Although he never regarded Hellenism as the only manifestation of the Renaissance, Pater considered it a structural element, as we have seen above, and this explains why he read Dante's eclectic classicism as proto-humanistic: "Dante's large-minded treatment of all forms of classic power and achievement marks a stage of progress, from the narrower sentiment of the Middle Age, towards 'humanism,' towards the mental attitude of the Renaissance and of the modern world" (Shadwell 1892, xxii-xxiii).

If Hellenism and the Renaissance are two of Pater's subjects of choice, Romanticism is undoubtedly another point of reference for his thought. As is well known, since his very first essays, Pater delved deeply into the phenomenon of Romantic literary culture, which he valued, like ancient Greece and its early modern revival, as a watershed event in

<sup>34</sup> For Ruskin and Pater see chiefly Daley 2001 and Brake 2001.

cultural history. (Incidentally, it is partly because of their similar degree of aesthetic-historical impact that Pater is often keen on emphasising the elements of continuity of these three moments of change: all of them, for instance, advocate the union of spirit and matter that I have discussed above.) Pater was practically the first, in England, to use terms such as ‘Romanticism’ and ‘romantic’ systematically (and positively) to classify British and European artists and works of art that nowadays may be unquestionably defined as ‘Romantic’. And yet, although at times he applies this category in a rather chronologically restricted, philological sense, he more often than not extends it so as to include other moments of European culture, from his own times back to antiquity.<sup>35</sup> In this respect, his memorable, compelling definition of Romanticism as the “addition of strangeness to beauty” and the “addition of curiosity” to the “desire of beauty” lends itself to describe an underlying tendency in literary and art history, “an ever-present, an enduring principle” (Pater 1974, 211).

Just as Pater’s aesthetics was profoundly indebted to Romanticism, so the Romantics were influenced by Dante, whom they often revered as the forefather of their poetic, social, and political ideas.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, given Dante’s much-studied influence on the Romantics, as well as Pater’s lifelong engagement with and inclusive conception of Romanticism, it comes as no surprise that Pater viewed Dante as a proto-Romantic poet. Indeed, in Pater’s essay on Romanticism, which was originally published in periodical form in 1876, and later slightly revised and appended as a “Postscript” to *Appreciations*, Dante is said to epitomise the medieval counterpart (or rather phase) of Romantic poetry. The essay’s approach to Romantic medievalism is twofold. From the point of view of the nineteenth-century reception of the Middle Age, Pater (1974, 213) observes that some features of medieval art particularly appealed to Romantic curiosity, providing a source for the “strange beauty” prized by Romantic artists. More interestingly, from the perspective of Medieval culture itself, he remarks that, although the action of (Romantic) curiosity as both a creative and interpretive principle is transhistorical, this tension towards stranger and therefore more exciting aesthetic pleasures is especially strong in those epochs such as the ‘later Middle Age’ (or, in other words, the Medieval Renaissance), where true interest in the aesthetic was finally awoken ‘after a long *ennui*’, that is after a period of artistic decline. (As is well known, and as Pater himself indicates in the essay, certain correlates of his idea of curiosity, such as the cultivation of the pleasures of art and the appreciation of art based on the type of pleasurable impressions it gives, are general tenets of his own aesthetics.)

The Romantic dimension of medieval culture is encapsulated by Dante’s verse, especially by its rather Wordsworthian focus on powerful, subjective feeling. This Romantic vein is evident, Pater (1974, 214) argues, in Dante’s reworking of Virgil’s episode of the “blood of Polydorus” spouting from the broken branches of a myrtle bush (*Aeneid*, 3, ll. 22-68): Dante amplifies and sensationalises Virgil’s passage into an entire

<sup>35</sup> For Pater and Romanticism see n. 23 above.

<sup>36</sup> For Dante and Romanticism see Audeh and Havelly 2012; Ellis 1983; Burwick and Douglass 2011; Havelly 1998.

canto of the *Commedia* (*Inferno* XIII), imbuing it with “a sentiment of profound pity,” that is with the “higher degree of passion” that, in Pater’s early essay “Aesthetic Poetry,” characterises the “romantic school” (190).<sup>37</sup> A similar attention towards Romantic-inflected individuality is also in Pater’s Introduction to Shadwell’s *Purgatory*. In the text, Pater remarks that the uniqueness of the *Commedia* derives, at least in key part, from Dante’s outpouring of his “personality” into the “grandest of subject,” from the way in which the millenarian tradition of Christian thought (“that immense intellectual deposit of thirteen believing centuries”) is tinged with his interiority (Shadwell 1892, xv). As seen above, such emphasis on sensation and subjectivity is also structural to both Pater’s reception of Dante and his idea of the Renaissance, and it therefore comes as no surprise that he himself makes this correlation explicit in the essay on Romanticism. Here Pater’s notions of the Renaissance and Romanticism almost coalesce; especially in light of his role in *The Renaissance*, Dante stands out as a consummate practitioner of both aesthetic poles as well as the first great author of European literature:

And it is especially in that period of intellectual disturbance, immediately preceding Dante, amid which the romance languages define themselves at last, that this temper is manifested. Here, in the literature of Provence, the very name of *romanticism* is stamped with its true signification: here we have indeed a romantic world, grotesque even, in the strength of its passions, almost insane in its curious expression of them, drawing all things into its sphere, making the birds, nay! lifeless things, its voices and messengers, yet so penetrated with the desire for beauty and sweetness, that it begets a wholly new species of poetry, in which the *Renaissance* may be said to begin. (214)

In the essay on Michelangelo, Pater opines that Dante’s main difference from Michelangelo lies in the fact that he is not as steeped in scepticism as his early modern successor. While Michelangelo’s modern state of doubtfulness is “ignorant” of the first principles of things (“of the spiritual world, of the new body and its laws”), Dante’s metaphysical framework is unshakeable: “Dante’s belief in immortality is formal, precise, and firm, as much so almost as that of a child who thinks the dead will hear if you cry loud enough” (Pater 2010, 54). In associating Dante with epistemic certainty and the immortality of the soul, Pater parallels a larger tendency of the Victorian period, where Dante’s worldview was valued as a source of existential stability and even used to shape the Victorians’ problematic idea of the afterlife.<sup>38</sup> And yet, although the essay on Michelangelo points out this anti-modern aspect of Dante, most of Pater’s assessment of the Italian poet insists on his sheer modernity.<sup>39</sup> As I have shown above, this connection with modernity is obviously at the core of Pater’s essays on the Renaissance, in which he significantly remarks that Dante and Boccaccio were regarded as “modern” by Botticelli

<sup>37</sup> “Aesthetic Poetry” was first published in periodical form in 1868 under the title “Poems by William Morris.” It was later revised and included in *Appreciations*.

<sup>38</sup> See Milbank 1998, 164-201. In his explanatory notes to *The Renaissance*, Donald Hill has persuasively shown how Pater’s phrase “the new body” echoes Statius’s discussion of the shape of the soul in the afterlife in *Purgatorio* XXV, ll. 79-108 (Pater 1980, 358-359).

<sup>39</sup> Another aspect of Dante’s anti-modernity is in Pater’s essay on Botticelli, where Pater (2010, 31) criticises Dante for his too rigidly hierarchical vision of the world.

(Pater 2010, 29), and also informs his reading of Romanticism. In this light, it is not difficult to understand why Pater went as far as to contend that Dante's modern condition directly resonated with his own, post-Romantic times.

More or less implied in all of Pater's references to Dante, the issue of Dante's modernity is fully developed in the Introduction to Shadwell's *Purgatory*. At the beginning of the text, Pater refutes Voltaire's slanderous comment about the neglect of Dante's writings by observing that, on the contrary, his own age was particularly infatuated with the Italian poet. The contemporary mania for Dante, his "popularity" both with lay readers and "admirable scholars," could not be simply reduced to an escapist form of Medievalism, Pater argues, but has more specific, and profound, reasons, which he saw as linked to the "genius of the nineteenth century itself" (Shadwell 1892, xiv). Rich in historical sensibility as it was, Pater felt that his own age had opportunely broken down past prejudices against Dante and could finally benefit from a more philological appreciation of the poet's works.<sup>40</sup> Yet, in his view, nineteenth-century historicism is, interestingly, just one of the aspects that motivates the aesthetic reevaluation of Dante: "in our own age, sympathetic, eclectic, cosmopolitan, full of curiosity and abounding in 'historic sense,' certain barriers to a right appreciation of him have been removed" (xv). Communality of feeling, eclecticism, cosmopolitanism, and Romantic-derived curiosity: these are all features that Pater frequently attributed to modern times, and may be subsumed under his notions of complexity and multifariousness.<sup>41</sup> One may find, for instance, a slightly negative representation of such characteristics in "Winckelmann," where the self-reflexive "modern world" is described as full of "conflicted claims" and "entangled interests," "distracted by so many sorrows, so many preoccupations" (Pater 2010, 115). The idea of modernity is definitely implicated also by Pater's review of Arthur Symons's first collection *Days and Nights* (1889), in which "modern life" is optimistically characterised by its "variety and complexity" (Symons 2017, 181). Rather intriguingly, the aspects of modernity that are consonant with Dante's genius may be seen as fundamental ingredients of the age's protean complexity, and therefore the complex and various world which Pater associates with the undoubtedly modern, if not modernist, poems of Arthur Symons is also the same world that he finds particularly responsive to Dante's aesthetics, poetics, and language; as we shall see below, an allusion to Dante in Pater's review seems to corroborate this conjecture.

The all-encompassing, tumultuous richness of modernity is also central to Pater's essay on "Style." Indeed, in the essay the modern age's suitability for being represented through "imaginative prose, and its consequent resistance to being sung in poetry, are partly motivated by the "chaotic variety and complexity of its interests" (Pater 1974, 106). As is well known, in "Style" Pater is concerned with establishing a verbal equivalent of his ideal of the fusion of matter and spirit—something which he finds in the principle

<sup>40</sup> See Straub 2009, 113.

<sup>41</sup> For Pater's observations on modernity see Bristow 2018.

of the “architectural” arrangement of the text, where every part should be structural to the whole, in the search for the perfect correspondence between words, thoughts, and feelings, and in the scrupulous, fastidious preoccupation with polysemy, with exacting the maximum amount of meaning from every expression (in his motto, the frugality “which makes the most of a word;” Pater 1974, 110).<sup>42</sup> In this regard, it is therefore rather telling that style plays an important role in Pater’s modernising discussion of Dante, and that it does so in terms close to Pater’s own stylistic ideal. In the Introduction Pater lauds “the craftiest interweaving” of the components of the *Commedia*, its “deliberate evenness of execution,” its “sense of unity and proportion” in tandem with its handling “of every sort of minute literary beauty,” its “expressiveness” and rhythmic prowess (Shadwell 1892, xvi). In assessing Dante’s style through the lenses of his own poetics, Pater focuses also on Dante’s outstanding lexical range, inventiveness, and accuracy, noting rather acutely how Dante “is one of those artists whose general effect largely depends on vocabulary, on the minute particles of which his work is wrought, on the colour and outline of single words and phrases” (xxv).

The second aspect of modernity that, according to “Style,” lies behind the aesthetic supremacy of imaginative prose is “an all-pervading naturalism, a curiosity about everything whatever as it really is” (Pater 1974, 106). I have already emphasised the significance of a similarly naturalistic mode of representation, or realism, for Dante’s works and reception, and in particular its importance in Pater’s reading of the Italian poet. In light of this, it is no wonder that, in Pater’s account, one of the points of contact between the “genius” of Dante and late-nineteenth century culture is precisely their common realistic tendency. In the Introduction, Pater remarks that the “minuteness” of Dante’s “handiwork,” its meticulous rendering of details, fascinates his contemporaries because they are not less “realists” than Dante himself (Shadwell 1892, xvii). In Pater’s view, Dante’s verbal incisiveness satisfies the scientific disposition of the time, “connects itself with the empirical character of our science, our philosophic faith in the concrete, the particular” (xviii). In this sense, Dante’s realism is seen as consonant with positivism or, at least, with scientific empiricism, with the dominant late-nineteenth century belief that reality can, and therefore should, be analysed experimentally, objectively, and quantitatively. Moreover, just as this epistemic framework sought to examine external and internal phenomena as ultimately composed of the same, quantifiable matter, so Dante’s language is not merely adhesive to externality, Pater specifies, but could also capture the spectral, elusive world of our interiority. Dante’s realism is animated by “a minute sense of the external world and its beauty,” but also characterised by “a minute sense of the phenomena of the mind,” a fact which makes Dante as “skilful” a “psychologist” as his modern readers (xix).

Pater is very keen, in his discussion, on pointing out the intersections between realism as a contemporary set of beliefs and the realism of Dante’s verse. While he refers to his contemporaries as “realists” on account of their empiricist faith, later in the Introduction

---

<sup>42</sup> For “Style” see Østermark-Johansen 2011, 277-331.

Pater, as noted above, clearly marks out Dante as a “realist” on account of his mimetic language. In this sense, Pater seems here to presuppose a connection between his aesthetic and philosophical-historical concepts of realism, and therefore to imply that Dante’s realism is not merely engaged in dialogue with a general realistic temper of Victorian society, but also with a specific late-nineteenth century form of artistic realism. Indeed, that his use of the word ‘realism’ and its derivatives may bear a faint trace of the more recent artistic trends of the period is indicated by Pater himself in the Introduction: just as Pater’s age is attracted to Dante’s “minuteness of touch,” so “The modern artist, the modern student of art”—who seeks to apply a similar type of realism in their representation of the world—will find in Dante a perfect handling of their artistic ideal (Shadwell 1892, xviii-xix). Determining whether Pater’s passage alludes to a particular artistic or literary current is something of a challenging task—it would be mainly a matter of speculation—and probably falls outside the remit of my study. It is sufficient here to note that Pater was probably referring, rather generically, to the propensity for realism of much coeval literature and art—something close to the “so called ‘realism’ in art” mentioned in the review of Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* (263) that he published the year before in *The Bookman* (Pater 1974, 263); most importantly, it is vital to remark that Pater believed that Dante could be inspirational for contemporary art.

Pater’s Introduction contends that Dante’s modernity and artistic excellence are especially evident in the *Purgatorio*. Neither infernal nor celestial, the second realm of the afterlife is in some ways similar to our everyday reality, and thus more expressive of the earthly, sensuous, and art-related dimension that Pater emphasises in Dante. Pater observes that Dante’s “fineness of touch ... is at its height in the placid and temperate regions of the *Purgatorio*,” where all the “delicacies”—a rather epicurean term—of inner and outer life are fully visible (Shadwell 1892, xx). Moreover, as pointed out by Straub (2008, par. 8-9; 2009, 113-114), Pater explains the modernity of the *Purgatorio* as an effect of the religious spirit of his epoch (“an age of hope”), in which the widespread “religious scepticism” provoked a compensating sense of “hope or hopefulness,” a social feeling that is close to the “sentiment” that imbues Dante’s second *cantica* (Shadwell 1892, xx-xxi). This primacy of the *Purgatorio* in the Introduction may be certainly motivated by the fact that Pater was introducing a translation of this specific *cantica*, but the association of the *Purgatorio* with worldliness and the “modern spirit” is also suggested by a much earlier essay. In “Sandro Botticelli” Pater (2010, 30) laments that the Italian painter had not illustrated Dante’s *Purgatorio* instead of the *Inferno* because the former’s “subdued imagery” would have been less tricky for him to represent than the grotesqueness of the first *cantica* (as noted by Hill, Pater had no knowledge of the set of Botticelli’s drawings of the *Commedia* which were first housed in the private collection of the Duke of Hamilton and then purchased in 1882 by the Berlin prints museum: this set contains illustrations of all the cantos of the *Purgatorio*).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Pater’s essay seems to imply that the *Purgatorio*’s “subdued” reality was not merely less problematic to depict,

---

<sup>43</sup> See Pater 1980, 335.

but also especially congenial to Botticelli, who was interested in “that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, and decide no great causes, and make great refusals,” that is “what Dante scorns as unworthy alike of heaven and hell” (Pater 2010, 32). This “middle world” has been convincingly likened to both the Vestibule of Hell, as proposed by Hill (Pater 1980, 337-338), and the Antepurgatory, as suggested by Straub (2009, 114-115), but it may also be seen as including the entire Purgatory and even earthly life, especially since it is populated by rather mundane figures, “men and women, in their mixed and uncertain condition, always attractive ... but saddened perpetually” (Pater 2010, 32). Botticelli’s preference for the “middle world,” Pater argues, is representative of his aesthetic novelty, a detail which betokens Pater’s association of the *Purgatorio* with the modern world.

An underlying connection between modernity and the *Purgatorio* is also at the core of Pater’s review of Symons’s collection that I have mentioned above. From the very beginning of the review, which opens by calling into play concepts such as “modern literature” and “modern life” (Symons 2017, 181), Pater depicts Symons as a quintessentially modern poet. He remarks that Symons’s “themes” are “almost exclusively those of the present day” and that even the literary sources which he is overly eager to capitalise on are primarily concerned with actuality (“the actual life around us”) (181). In order to fully convey the typical feelings encapsulated by Symons’s verse, Pater inserts a rather unexpected allusion to Dante:

The reader of Dante will remember those words of La Pia in the *Purgatorio*, so dramatic in their brevity that they have seemed to interpret many a problematic scene of pictorial art. Shape their exacter meaning as we may, they record an instance of human passion, under the influence of some intellectual subtlety in the air, going to its end by paths round-about. Love casuistries, impassioned satiety, love’s inversion into cruelty, are experiences even more characteristic of our late day than of Dante’s somewhat sophisticated middle age; and it is just this complexion of sentiment—a grand passion, entangled in scruples, refinements, after-thoughts, reserved, repressed, but none the less masterful for that, conserving all its energies for expression in some unexpected way—that Mr Symons presents, with unmistakable insight. (181-182)

In Pater’s labyrinthine passage, Symons’s up-to-the-minute way of treating complex psychology—a technique which in his next two collections blossomed into an avant-garde form of impressionism—is compared to Dante’s minimalistic rendering of subtle, undefinable passions at the end of *Purgatorio* V. Pater is here evoking the much-discussed episode of “La Pia,” an enigmatic character whom the first commentators of the *Commedia* identified with an alleged noblewoman from Siena, Pia de’ Tolomei. Dante encounters the soul of this woman in the Antepurgatory, where she first asks him to remember her (in other words, to pray for her) and then succinctly “informs the wandering poet that her husband was somehow instrumental in her death in the malaria infested Maremma” (Saglia 2011, 118). Due to her tragic (and hazy) romantic story—it was generally believed that she had been murdered by her jealous or unfaithful husband—Pia de’ Tolomei became a much-celebrated figure in the nineteenth century,

both in Italy and in England, where she was sung by popular poets such as Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and painted by artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>44</sup> However, it was not the dark legend of her violent death, but the conciseness and suggestiveness of her words that resonated with Pater:

«Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo  
e riposato de la lunga via»,  
seguitò 'l terzo spirito al secondo,  
«Ricorditi di me, che son la Pia;  
Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma:  
salsi colui che 'n nanellata pria  
disposando m'avea con la sua gemma». (*Purgatorio* V, ll. 130-136)

By recording “an instance of human passion” in all its complexity, the few, poignant lines uttered by “La Pia” prefigure, in Pater’s view, all the uncanny intricacies of modern love (and life). Once again, the greatness of Dante bridges the gap between his “somewhat sophisticated middle age” and Pater’s time. Dante was so “central” to Pater that it even came to his mind when he wanted to find an analogue of the turn-of-the-century poet Symonds. Dante’s pioneering handling of sensoriality, his realism infused with spirituality, and his revolutionary impact on cultural history left an indelible mark on Pater’s thought. “La Pia” begged Dante to remember her; we can be in no doubt that Pater remembered Dante.

## REFERENCES

- ALIGHIERI, D. 2010. *Divina Commedia*, ed. by U. Bosco, G. Reggio, and M. Volante. Milano: Le Monnier Scuola.
- AUDEH, A., HAVELY, N. (eds.). 2012. *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BAROLINI, T. 1992. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2013. “Dante and Reality/Dante and Realism (Paradiso).” *SpazioFilosofico* 8:199-208.
- BAROLSKY, P. 1987. *Walter Pater's Renaissance*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- BORNSTEIN, G. 1988. *Poetic Remaking: The Art of Browning, Yeats, and Pound*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- LAUREL, B. 2001. “Degrees of Darkness: Ruskin, Pater and Modernism.” In G. Cianci, P. Nicholls (eds.). *Ruskin and Modernism*, 48-66. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- BRISTOW, J. 2018. “‘What an interesting period ... is this we are in!’: Walter Pater and the Synchronization of the ‘Æsthetic Life’.” In A-F. Gillard-Estrada, M. Lambert-Charbonnier, C. Ribeyrol

<sup>44</sup> See Saglia 2011. For Rossetti’s painting *La Pia de’ Tolomei* (1868-1880) see <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s207.rap.html>> [accessed 20 February 2022].

- (eds.). *Testing New Opinions and Courting New Impressions: New Perspectives on Walter Pater*, 127-147. London: Routledge.
- BULLEN, J. B. 1994. *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BURWICK, F., DOUGLASS, P. (eds.). 2011. *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- CLEMENTS, P. 1985. *Baudelaire and the English Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- CONLON, J. J. 1982. *Walter Pater and the French Tradition*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.
- COOKSEY, T. 2003. "The Central Man in the World: The Victorian Myth of Dante." In R. Lansing (ed.). *Dante: The Critical Complex*, 151-165. Vol. 8. New York: Routledge.
- CRISAFULLI, E. 2000. "The Divine Comedy." In O. Classe (ed.). *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation Into English: A-L*, 339-343. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
- DALEY, K. 2001. *The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin*. Ohio State University Press.
- ELLIS, S. 1983. *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T. S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- EVANGELISTA, S. 2002. "'Outward Nature and the Moods of Men': Romantic Mythology in Pater's Essays on Dionysus and Demeter'." In L. Brake, L. Higgins, C. Williams (eds.). *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, 107-118. Greensboro: ELT Press.
- EVANS, L. (ed.). 1970. *Letters of Walter Pater*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FRECCERO, J. 2007. "Allegory and autobiography." In R. Jacoff (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 161-180. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HALMI, N. 2009. "Coleridge on Allegory and Symbol." In F. Burwick (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 345-358. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HAVELY, N. (ed.). 1998. *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- HEXT, K. 2013. *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- HÖNNIGHAUSEN, G. 1972. "Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti." *Victorian Poetry* 10.1:1-15.
- HÖNNIGHAUSEN, L. 1988. *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and "Fin de Siècle"*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HÜHN, H., VIGUS J., eds. 2013. *Symbol and Intuition: Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*. Oxford: Legenda.
- . 2013. "Introduction." In H. Hühn, J. Vigus (eds.). *Symbol and Intuition: Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, 1-19. Oxford: Legenda.
- KRIESEL, J. C. 2019. "Allegories of the Corpus." In Z.G. Barański, S. Gilson (eds.). *The Cambridge companion to Dante's Commedia*, 110-124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LANDOW, G. P. 1980. *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought*. London: Routledge.
- MACAULAY, C. B. 1860. *Miscellaneous Writings*. Vol. 2. London: Longman.
- MARTINEZ, R. L. 2010. "Allegory." In R. Lansing (ed.). *The Dante Encyclopaedia*, 24-34. London: Routledge.
- MAXWELL, C. 1993. "Devious Symbols': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Purgatorio." *Victorian Poetry* 31.1:19-40.
- . 2012. "Shelley's Alchemy, Pater's Transformations." In C. Casaliggi, P. March-Russell (eds.). *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*, 85-100. London: Routledge.
- MCGRATH, F. C. 1986. *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- MILBANK, A. 1998. *Dante and the Victorians*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- ØSTERMARK-JOHNANSEN, L. 2011. *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- PANTONE, D. 2014. *Benvenuto da Imola Dantista in Progress: Un'analisi genetica del Comentum*. LED Edizioni Universitarie: Milano.
- PATER, W. 1893. *Plato and Platonism*. London: Macmillan.
- . (19) [Dante]. A.MS.; In Walter Pater, Papers, ca. 1877-1894. MS Eng 1150 (14-35). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (Houghton)
- . 1974. *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. by H. Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1980. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by D.L. Hill. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1985. *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by M. Levey. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 2010. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by M. Beaumont. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. by L. Østermark-Johansen. London: Modern Humanities Research Association.
- RUSKIN, J. 1904. *The Stones of Venice: Volume II*, ed. by E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn. London: George Allen.
- SAGLIA, D. 2011. "Hemans's Record of Dante: 'The Maremma' and the Intertextual Poetics of Plenitude." In F. Burwick P. Douglass (eds.). *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, 117-131. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- SHADWELL, C.L. (trans.). 1892. *The Purgatory of Dante Alighieri*. London: Macmillan.
- STRAUB, J. 2008. "'Diaphaneité' and Dante: A New Perspective on Pater's Early Essay." *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 68. Accessed February 20, 2022. DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.7802>>
- . 2009. *Victorian Muse: The Afterlife of Dante's Beatrice in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. London: Continuum.
- . 2012. "Dante's Beatrice and Victorian Gender Ideology." In A. Audeh, N. Havelly (eds.). *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, 204-222. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SYMONDS, J. A. 1893. *An Introduction to the Study of Dante*. Third edition. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- SYMONS, A. 2017. *Selected Early Poems*. Ed. by J. Desmarais and C. Baldick. Cambridge: MHRA.
- TINKLER-VILLANI, V. 2004. "In the Footsteps of His Father? Dantean Allegory in Gabriele Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti." In D. Clifford, L. Roussillon (eds.). *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis Then and Now*, 131-144. London: Anthem.
- VARTY, A. 1991. "The Crystal Man: A Study of 'Diaphaneité'." In L. Brake, I. Small (eds.). *Pater in the 1990s*, 205-215. Greensboro: ELT Press.
- WILDE, O. 2006. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by J. Bristow. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WILLIAMS, C. 1989. *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

RAFFAELLA ANTINUCCI

## “I AM THE MEANS AND NOT THE END”

*Dante and E.M. Forster*

**ABSTRACT:** The well-known epigraph to *Howards End* (1910), “only connect,” provides a fitting motto for the life and work of Edward Morgan Forster. With the epigrammatic intensity of a manifesto, the famous locution also encapsulates the compositional principle of Forster’s art, informed by intertextual references and quotations, ranging from Pope to Whitman, from Plato to Shakespeare, from Shelley to Dante. Less explicit than that of other models, the presence of the *Sommo Poeta* permeates Forster’s fictional as well as critical universe like a *basso continuo*, to use one of the musical metaphors so dear to the English writer: while Dante’s spirit can be caught in the literary interstices in which the narration aspires to become vision – in his early novels and most notably in Forster’s fictional representation of Dante in the supernatural tale “A Celestial Omnibus” (1911) – the Italian poet features as a privileged interlocutor in Forster’s criticism and journals. This essay intends to retrace the forms and development of this artistic dialogue starting from the lecture on Dante that Forster delivered in 1907 for the Working Men’s College, the result of a study of the Florentine poet and of *The Divine Comedy* over which, as the author wrote in 1958, he had “put in quite a lot of work.”

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, E.M. Forster, Victorian and Edwardian Dantism.

## Forster and Dante: an unwritten story

There seems to be a general consensus among literary critics that for both the Victorians and Modernists the reading of Dante was central in the process of interpreting the dramatic changes of contemporary morals, religion and society, as well as of reconciling the rampant secularism with a lost transcendent (McDougal 1985; Milbank 1998, Caselli 2021). In this respect, the names of Carlyle and Ruskin recur among the first and most ardent admirers of the Italian poet, the very originators of a composite discourse that shaped the notion of “a Victorian Dante” (Marroni 2009, 243). Yet, Edward Morgan Forster has been rarely included in the circle of the British authors who turned to the Florentine poet for inspiration, although his personal papers as well as critical and fictional works brim with Dantean references, which, with a few, and not very recent, exceptions (Macaulay 1938; Shusterman 1965), have remained almost completely unnoticed. A possible reason for such a neglect may be ascribed to the very elusive character of Dante’s spiritual and artistic legacy: while evidence suggests that Dante had a special significance to Forster, as Shusterman justly observes, “the extent of

the influence and the exact nature of the influence are hard to determine" (1965, 41). Moreover, in his essay on Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, titled "A Book that Influenced Me" (1944), the author himself openly rejected any "anxiety of influence" when he grouped together *The Divine Comedy* with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as his "three great books [...] three monuments" (1972, 219), only to conclude that "they have not influenced me in the very least, though I came across them all at an impressionable age, and over Dante I put in quite a lot of work" (219). Besides the ambiguous quality of any notion of literary "influence," the unreliability of a writer's statement, and his/her possible unawareness about the inspiring effect of previous readings, it is undeniable that the presence of the Florentine poet represents a constant feature of Forster's long career as a writer and critic from his early twenties, as testified by the autograph documents preserved at the King's College Archive at Cambridge, especially by his notes headed "Dante" (1901-03; GBR/0272/EMF 13/7, vol. 2/7), "Notes on Dante's *Inferno*" (1901-02; GBR/0272/EMF 15/5, vol. 2/7), and "On Dante's Works" (1903-30; GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6), respectively.

In most of Forster's essays, variously collected and published both during his lifetime and posthumously, the figure of Dante recurs as a standard of greatness, notwithstanding his historical and cultural distance from the Edwardian episteme. As Scherer Herz maintains, Forster "frequently recurred to him [Dante] in his *Commonplace Book* and in his essays. Indeed, among the writers and writings of the past that he often invoked [...] only Shakespeare and the Bible appear more often and more variously" (1988, 136). In an article on Proust (1929), Forster's commentary on the French writer's pessimistic theory of human intercourse – whereby "the fonder we are of people the less we understand them" (1936, 97) – is developed around a contrast with Dante's opposite view that "the fonder we are of people the better we understand them" (97). Dante is evoked virtually any time Forster speculates on the value of human existence and on the ultimate meaning of literature and art in general, as is evident in "What I Believe" (1938)<sup>1</sup>. It is also noteworthy that Forster's inventory of his personal books given in the essay "In My Library" (1941) is organized around themes and literary genres – "Books about India and by Indians, modern poetry, ancient history, American novels, travel books, books on the state of the world, and on the world-state, books on individual liberty, art-albums" – with one single exception closing the list, "Dante and books about him" (1972, 297).

---

<sup>1</sup> In a passage that is frequently quoted by critics – "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" – Forster makes Dante the paragon of authentic loyalty, since he placed "Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of Hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome" (1972, 66). As Shusterman noted (1965, 42), Forster is partly misreading Dante; however, the quotation is indicative of the exemplary stature credited to Dante in both his artistic and civic life.

If Forster's engagement with Dante was steady, his personal papers and narrative output show that the meditation on the Italian poet's thought and work intensified in the decade 1905-1915, which also coincided with Forster's most creative period. The present essay aims to retrace the forms – both critical and narrative – and development of this artistic dialogue starting from the lecture on Dante that Forster delivered in 1907 for the Working Men's College. It subsequently investigates Dantesque elements in Forster's early novels and in his short fiction, notably in the supernatural story "A Celestial Omnibus" (1908), in order to identify the characteristics of Forster's Dantism and verify to what extent it resembles or deviates from the coeval reception of the Italian poet in Britain.

### Dante, our contemporary: Forster's lecture on Dante (1907)

In 1907 Forster was invited to give a lecture on Dante at The Working Men's College, an institution founded in London in 1854 thanks to the Christian Socialist and Cooperative movements, with the aim of providing artisans with an education in "human studies" as well as with occasions for social gatherings modelled on the university life. The paper was thus written to be delivered orally to an audience of men with limited formal education and was later published in *The Working Men's College Journal* (1908). Both the tone and diction of the essay therefore reflect the context and the addressees of the lecture.

The first aspect that strikes the reader of the twenty-first century is Forster's outstanding talent as an orator. In order to accomplish the difficult task of making Dante accessible to a public of quite uncultured men, the author combines two old rhetorical techniques – storytelling and the so-called "rule of three" – and decides to structure his speech around three questions, each addressing one of Dante's most famous works: *The New Life*, *The Empire (De Monarchia)*, and the *Divine Comedy* respectively. After a very Dantesque incipit – "As we journey through life" (Forster 1971, 146), Forster clarifies that these three queries are universal, regardless of time and place, "inseparable from our humanity" (146). From a linguistic point of view, the pervasive use of the collective and possessive pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* makes the authorial voice inclusive and never condescending from the very outset, setting the tone for the whole speech. The three "great questions" as thus formulated:

How shall I behave to the people I know – to my relatives, friends, and acquaintances? [...] How shall I behave to the people whom I don't know [...] – to the government, to society as a whole, to humanity as a whole? [...] How shall I behave to the Unknowable [...] God, or Fate, or whatever you like to call the invisible power that lies behind the world? (146)

Before addressing the first issue, Forster supplies a concise account of the major events in Dante's life and some background information on the historical context of fourteenth-century Florence. He particularly stresses the relevance of the year 1300, which denoted a watershed both for Dante and the Western world, marking the beginning of the poet's exile from Florence as well as the crucial moment "when the medieval world was passing into the modern" (148). The opposition between medievalism on the one hand, and modernity on the other, would resurface time and again in Forster's critical articles and fiction in connection with Dante, "a poet with one foot in the Renaissance, the other in Medievalism" (Macaulay 1970, 73).

Being the subject of several Pre-Raphaelite paintings, *The New Life* is introduced with a reference to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Holiday, familiar names for the majority of Forster's audience. On account of its almost uneventful frame story and exotic theme of courtly love, Dante's first collection of verse is defined as "a queer little book [...] half a diary and half a novel" (Forster 1971, 149) whose reading could easily result in irritation, for very little is revealed about Beatrice apart from the fact that she is loved by Dante. This statement is echoed in one of the preparing notes Forster wrote for the lecture, when he maintains that the discussions in *The New Life* are "sometimes merely scholastic, sometimes eternally true, sometimes fantastic. Mixture of learning and self-analysis makes it difficult to read him in these matters" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). In this regard, Forster makes a telling comparison with Shakespeare's poetry, claiming that while the meaning of his *Sonnets* could be obscure, their protagonists, unlike Dante's, are fully developed. This brings him back to the first question, i.e., how to behave towards the people we know: if one considers that Beatrice personifies not only Dante's lifelong love, but also, due to the emotions that she inspires in the poet, his link to God and future guide through Paradise in the *Comedy*, the answer that Dante seems to give is that people are "means to something else [...] windows in this sordid world" (Forster 1971, 149) through which one can get a glimpse of heaven. Forster explains that this was a common way of reasoning in Dante's times, which also accounts for the seemingly illogical separation – at least in the eyes of modern readers – between feeling and marriage in the notion of courtly love. In this light, marriage would be regarded as a sacrilege, a debasement of an emotion that is experienced as solely spiritual and sublime.

At this point Forster highlights two implications of Dante's medieval view by means of two further questions. The first one concerns what today would be termed a gender issue: the writer asks whether this notion of love is "a true compliment to the woman herself" (151), thus exposing the passive and submissive role assigned to women in the poetry of *stilnovisti* like Dante – the inevitable counterpart of their idealization – and implicitly, albeit briefly – "I am not going to answer this question, but I want to suggest it to you" (151) – touching upon the most authentic nature of love relationships. The second query is more central in Forster's opinion of Dante the man and regards the way in which he behaved to people he did not much like or only knew slightly. Drawing from

some incidents in the life of the Italian poet, Forster shows that Dante behaved as a "cad" (153) towards people, including women, he did not admire or respect, hence the conclusion that "he soared higher than we can; but he could sink lower" (151). In one of his notes on *The Empire*, Forster's aversion is expressed in even stronger tones: "How ungenial Dante is! [...] impossible to love him, or to feel that he said a kind word to a chap in passing" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). Considering the value that Forster assigned to personal relationships in his life and literary works, it is not surprising that he detects in Dante's incapacity "to be fair to the commonplace" (1971, 153) the fatal flaw that tainted his otherwise noble character. It is a fault, however, embedded in Dante's medievalism: "We of today – and I count Shakespeare one of us – try, however unsuccessfully, to look *at* people, not through them" (153, emphasis in the text), Forster concludes.

This unfavourable judgement is immediately counterbalanced by the praise of Dante's absolute unselfishness in his attitude towards mankind in general, the very subject of the second of his "great books," *The Empire*. To Forster, Dante's public life is "inspiring" (154) insofar as it testifies to his boundless love for humanity – "he loved humanity as it was never loved again until the eighteenth century" (154). As a result, Dante's claim on immortality is based on both his genius and selfless idealism, which make his position "unique in the history of the world" (154). Forster's premise is that Dante's major drive as a writer was the improvement of humanity, the strive to contribute to the establishment of a happier and peaceful society, an ideal to which, as his biography shows, he was ready to sacrifice his own life. The exposition of Dante's political credo expressed in the Latin treatise is prefaced by a long digression on the medieval concept of the complete separation between body and soul, that is, the split coexistence within any human being of a mortal and corruptible element – body – and an immortal and incorruptible one – soul. Likewise, Dante believed in the autonomy between the temporal and spiritual spheres, of which only the latter fell under the Pope's authority. In other words, he contested the hierocratic conception of the Pontiff's absolute power – both religious and secular – elaborated by the Roman Church, and advocated, instead, the advent of a new Holy Roman Empire, which he saw personified in the figure of Henry of Luxembourg, Henry VII. Like the Pope, the Emperor too was an agent of God, whose mission of guiding humanity in material affairs Dante considered equally divine. As is known, the failure of Henry VII's Italian campaign, as well as his sudden death, sealed Dante's fate marking the beginning of his permanent exile from Florence, the city he had tried to defend from the temporal demands of Pope Boniface VIII.

Without delving deep into one of the most controversial debates of fourteenth-century Italy, Forster's speech calls attention to two aspects of Dante's political utopia that he sees just as vital in his days. When it comes to the main objective of the ideal Empire – that of granting earthly happiness to mankind – Dante insists it can only be

achieved through peace. On this point comparisons and references to Forster's contemporary world become more frequent, while Dante's modernity is thus extolled:

"There is nothing medieval or out of date in this. Dante's words are as true today as when he wrote them. He never speaks of the beauties of war, like Ruskin or Rudyard Kipling. He has fought in battles himself, he knows what they are like. Peace is the only educational atmosphere for humanity." (159)

Forster is distancing Dante, and himself, from both Kipling's jingoism and Ruskin's chivalric notion of a "noble" kind of war on which, as he maintained in "War" (1865), "great art" is founded and flourishes (Ruskin 1905, XVIII, 459-460). Whereas Dante emerges as a modern thinker, Ruskin turns out to be a truly medieval intellectual. Be it the Holy Roman Empire or The Hague Conference mentioned by Forster, Dante foresaw that only an international power can act as a political arbitrator and ensure peace. In its turn, and in marked contrast to Ruskin's creed that "there is no art among a shepherd people, if it remains at peace" (Ruskin 1905, XVIII, 460), a peaceful society is the precondition for "unity," understood as the ideal atmosphere for the fullest development of "the potentialities of the human race *as a whole*" (Forster 1971, 159, emphasis in the text). Forster's tellingly underscores Dante's belief that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; that humanity is greater than the individuals who go to make it" (159), a principle underpinning his own humanist view of life.

As a second corollary to Dante's civic utopia, Forster points out that this notion of unity entails neither monotony nor social equality but aims to a state of harmony in which all differences are reconciled. Forster's emphasis on this argument is revealing of both his preoccupation with such subjects in the 1900s, and, most importantly, of the impact that Dante's ideas, apart from his poetry, had on the development of his own theory of human connectedness. Although deemed "impossible," Dante's political utopia expounded in *The Empire* remains, in Forster's opinion, "as not only one of the most beautiful schemes of this kind, but also as one of the wisest" (162). Forster's approval is apparent, with the only difference that to Dante's medieval mind the earthly concord could solely be the manifestation of heavenly bliss. For his vision of terrestrial harmony, the Florentine poet had found his model in the eurhythmic orbits of the stars, which, as Forster reminds his audience, feature as the alpha and omega of his writings, the very final words of each of the three parts of *The Divine Comedy*.

The discussion of Dante's magnum opus occupies the last, and shortest, section of Forster's lecture. The lesser attention it is awarded, however, must not be read as a value judgement, for the novelist promptly acknowledges its prominence as the Florentine's "greatest book" (163) both because "it contains his best poetry" (163) and because it deals with the question Dante deemed most important, i.e., "our behaviour to the Unknowable" (163). The limited space devoted to *The Divine Comedy* should be rather ascribed to Forster's own interpretation of Dante's most enduring legacy, which lies in his intuition of a harmonious society based on peace and tolerance, the very core and

main objective of the lecture. In other words, Forster is clearly more interested in Dante's answers to the first two questions, both of which concern human behaviour towards fellow human beings, than to his religious response to the mystery of the unknown.

With the aid of a diagram, Forster sets out to illustrate Dante's imaginative journey and the structure of the three spiritual kingdoms of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. As to the first realm, he briefly mentions Virgil, the guide sent from Beatrice to escort Dante through the nine circles of Hell. In his personal notes, Forster criticizes the austere characterization of the Latin poet, who, although portrayed by Dante as "the ideal pedagogue," in his judgement typifies the very opposite of a model mentor. A notable aspect of Forster's succinct overview of the main incidents and unfortunate souls that dwell in *Inferno* is the special emphasis he places on the coeval popularity of Dante's first *cantica*, which prefigures his subsequent "deconstruction" of *Hell's* alleged superiority: "This is *the most famous* part of the poem, and the dramatic episodes of Paolo and Francesca, of Farinata degli Uberti, and of Conte Ugolino, are known to thousands who have never followed Dante through the *less exciting* realms of Purgatory and Heaven" (164-165, my emphasis). Forster is implicitly beginning to (re-)direct his audience's reception of the *Divine Comedy* towards less conventional positions.

Equally short is the part devoted to *Purgatory*, whose atmosphere is encapsulated in one word, "cleanliness" (165). Indeed, Forster's admiration for this section permeates his private memos, in which the beauty of Dante's imagery is extolled in theatrical terms: "They cleanse themselves in the Dawn. The staging magnificent. Cato has disappeared like a tiresome prologue, and the curtain rises upon the trembling seas and dewy meadows" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). Dante's "dramatic power" (Forster 1971, 166), however, seems to disappear as he travels through Purgatory and Heaven. The progressive focus on sensations, rather than on personalities, in Forster's view accounts for the disappointment that many readers may feel in approaching the realm of bliss. Still, Forster invites his audience to go beyond the prevailing response to *The Divine Comedy* and resist the primacy assigned to *Hell*: "But those who have followed the poet's spiritual yearnings *with due attention and with sympathy* will find here a sublime fulfilment, and perhaps think that the 'Heaven' contains *the most wonderful words ever written by the hand of man*" (166, my emphasis).

Foster's paper ends on the assertion of the "authoritative" quality of Dante's voice and vision in the *Comedy*: his gaze is godlike, for "his standpoint is not in this world. He views us from an immense height, as a man views a plain from a mountain" (167). This is the reason why any lecture on him can be "hard to follow," and his words can appear "a little remote," even "false" – "we feel that by his very elevation he is not qualified to judge" (167). Yet this impression, warns Forster, only derives from our different epistemic perspective, the same that makes Shakespeare not only "a sublime poet, but also a jolly good fellow" (168), and Dante a disagreeable, if not terrorizing company despite his poetry full of love and beauty. Therefore, the natural response of twentieth-century

readers is to suppose that "he knows no more about us than we know about the canals in Mars" (167). Still, Forster continues, "Here we are wrong. Dante knows a great deal about us. He was himself a soldier, politician, a scholar, and a lover, and he never forgets his experiences" (167).

In highlighting not so much Dante's artistry and poetical excellence, which is given for granted and perhaps might not be appealing to the public of the Working Men's College, but above all his passion for humanity and untiring efforts to imagine and set the foundations for a peaceful and tolerant society, indeed what Forster offers is a reading of Dante as our contemporary. In this regard, the 1907 lecture is more revealing of Forster's wide-ranging engagement with Dante's life and figure than of his literary appreciation. This aspect, together with the pre-eminence given to *Heaven*, represents the most distinguishing feature of Forster's response to the Italian poet, the one that primarily distances him from Victorian Dantism. Moreover, all the major points addressed in the speech would resurface in Forster's fiction of the period, which, starting from its titles, appears to be imbued with Dantesque overtones: "The Eternal Moment" (1905), *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), "The Other Kingdom" (1909).

### Dante and the myth of the South in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

As is clear from his lecture on Dante, Forster only partly assimilated the tradition of Dante bequeathed by the Victorians, who were fascinated and almost obsessed with the *Comedy* and its first canticle, whose iconic force proved to be a powerful metaphor for modern times in which the urban vortex, swallowing up both natural and human landscapes, often assumed hellish connotations. The conventional acknowledgment, not only English, of the greater poetic nature of *Hell* is evoked by Forster in the first of his novels, fittingly set in Italy, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. The fictional advocate of this idea is the Tuscan Gino, who, after having politely praised England's greatness, proudly reminds the English Philip Herrington that

'Italy too [...] is a great country. She has produced many famous men – for example Garibaldi and Dante. The latter wrote the 'Inferno', the 'Purgatorio', the 'Paradiso'. *The 'Inferno' is the most beautiful*. And with the complacent tone of one who has received a solid education, he quoted the opening lines [...]

'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

Che la diritta via era smarrita' (Forster 2007, 24, my emphasis)

With subtle irony, the writer points to a primacy ratified in Italy under the hermeneutic influence of Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce: the "complacent

tone" of the young uneducated Italian has a comical effect on the reader, for only a few pages earlier the refined Philip had praised the cathartic and ennobling power of Italy<sup>2</sup> hailing the journey undertaken by his sister-in-law Lilia as the beginning of a "New Life"<sup>3</sup>. However, Forster's target does not seem to be so much the canonical study of Dante but rather his literary reception influenced by the authoritative judgement of the so-called Victorian "prophets," most notably Carlyle and Ruskin<sup>4</sup>.

In staging the encounter and clash between two antithetical cultures – the English and the Italian – between two different but complementary ways of understanding human life, and in search of a beneficial synthesis, Forster uses Dante to unearth the stereotypes underlying the English rampant *Italomania*, especially the "virtual" and unreal nature of the idealised and picturesque image attributed to Italy since the early times of the Grand Tour. Without renouncing to the mysterious and magical aura that surrounds Italian places, Forster sets the unfortunate events narrated in the novel in an imaginary town, Monteriano – an ancient village in the neighbourhood of Siena, probably based on the towns of Monticiano or Montepulciano – a place-name that also serves as the first, provisional title of the book. Its subsequent substitution with the famous line from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) – "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" (l. 1625), which plays on the pun resulting from the assonance between the lexemes "Angels" and "Angles" – does not affect the centrality of Monteriano, heightened right from the outset by means of a *myse en abyme* that directly involves the Italian literary culture and its greatest representative. Leafing through the Baedeker on Central Italy, the bible of any English tourist, under the heading "Monteriano" the protagonists, and readers with them, learn of its ancient origins:

History: Monteriano, the Mons Rianus of Antiquity, whose Ghibelline tendencies are noted by Dante (Purg. XX), definitely emancipated itself from Poggibonsi in 1261. Hence the distich, "Poggibonzi, faui in là, che Monteriano si fa città!" till recently enscribed over the Siena gate. (Forster 2007, 12)

The reference to Dante, deliberately contrived by Forster, is used to denounce the cultural blindness of a travel guide that, instead of practical and detailed information,

---

<sup>2</sup> "Italy really purifies and ennobles all who visit her. She is the school as well as the playground of the world. It is really to Lilia's credit that she wants to go there" (Forster 2007, 6).

<sup>3</sup> Dante's early work enjoyed great popularity in England during the nineteenth century, especially after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation, "Dante's New Life", included in *The Early Italian Poets* (1861). On this subject, see Camilletti forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> As is well known, in the section "Hero as Poet" of his study *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) Carlyle had given the *Sommo Poeta* the primacy of world literature and deemed the *Comedy* "the sincerest of all Poems" (1968, 120, emphasis in the text), while in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) Ruskin famously defined Dante as "the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral, and intellectual faculties, all at their highest" (XI, 187). On this topic see, among others, Bidney 1976, Brand 1984-85, Marroni 1996, and Wallace 2003.

offers vague literary citations, thus reducing Dante's poetry to a mere hallmark for evocative excursions<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the allusion to the twentieth canto of *Purgatory* is meaningful if one considers the role that the sins committed by Ugo Capeto in the fifth cornice – avarice and the "aged she-wolf," greed – play in the plot of the novel. Even the earthquake that shakes the mountain of Purgatory, accompanied by the chorus of many souls intoning the *Gloria*, on whose obscure message Dante's twentieth canto closes, seems to foreshadow, in a semi-serious rewriting, the epiphany experienced by Philip and Caroline at the foot of an entirely etymological mountain, the Forsterian "Mons Rianus," and similarly favoured by music, namely Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In both cases a release takes place: from temporal punishment for the souls of Purgatory, from the emotional prison of the "northern" upbringing for the English protagonists of the novel.

Composed in a still hesitant style, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* anticipates some of the *motifs* of Forster's writing, typically shaped around definite spatial coordinates that in this novel place South against North, Italy against England, and, in Dantean terms, Heaven against Hell. It is the tower of Monteriano that stands out as the objective correlative of the verticality inherent to the fictional worlds created by Forster:

"It reaches *up to heaven*," said Philip, "and *down to the other place*". The summit of the tower was radiant in the sun, while its base was in shadow and pasted over with advertisements. "Is it to be a symbol of the town?" (Forster 2007, 83, my emphasis)

Forster's microcosms are certainly imbued with symbols; still, as Virginia Woolf noted in an essay on her fellow Bloomsburian (1942), the metaphorical level does not undermine their realism: through "eternal moments" reality is transfigured but not erased. It is in this very technique, which Erich Auerbach termed "figural," that lies one of the most significant points of convergence with the *Comedy*, perhaps the most lasting artistic legacy of the *Sommo Poeta*.

It should come as no surprise, then, the prominence Forster attaches to places, which can also be inferred from a quick glance at the titles of his production: foreshadowing Cesare Pavese and his moon, in the introduction to *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1946) he maintained "in them also I believe" (Forster 1972, XIII). Whether it is Monteriano, the spires and gardens of Cambridge, the view of Florence from the bedroom of the Bertolini guesthouse, Howards End or the Indian mountains, places are turned into interior landscapes and shrouded in a mystical halo. What is brought back to life is the *genius loci* of classicism, which Forster's updating condenses into the poetics of the "sense of place"

---

<sup>5</sup> In *A Room with a View* one of the English characters, Miss Levin, admiring the Ponte alle Grazie with Lucy, remarks: "particularly interesting, mentioned by Dante" (Forster 2000a, 16). As pointed out by E.K. Helsinger, Ruskin himself used the *Commedia* as a guide on his Italian visits, together with the indispensable Murray (1982, 143).

expounded by Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*<sup>6</sup>. It follows that for the English writer the figure of Dante does not only evoke his homeland, but also coincides with it: in many respects Dante *is Italy*<sup>7</sup>, and in the myth of the South Forster seems to find the possibility of an alternative existence, of a "middle way" that combines passion with rationality, primitive instincts with ascetical tension, and, ultimately, nature with culture.

In this asymptotic effort, Forster does not fully recoil from Ruskinian Dantism, which adapted the literary, civil and political sublimity of the Florentine poet to the axiological needs of a country like England in rapid transformation, in search for new ethical and artistic anchorages. Nevertheless, unlike his predecessors, it is chiefly from the third *cantica* of the *Comedy* that Forster draws images and stylistic elements that portend a spiritual renewal. Dante's heavenly imagery is accordingly employed by Forster to create his own *commedia*. If in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* even a distracted reader would not miss the frequent use of the lexeme *heaven* and a whole "angelic" and "heavenly" isotopy<sup>8</sup> alluded to right from the very title, it is with *A Room with a View* that the references to the last realm take on a more structural pre-eminence.

### "The whole of everything at once": heavenly motifs in *A Room with a View*

Setting up another Italian-English comparison, Forster's third published novel follows the turning points in the spiritual growth of the young Lucy Honeychurch, torn between her commitment to the refined Cecil Vyse and the attraction to the extravagant George Emerson. Her inner journey takes the form of a progress that literally proceeds from darkness to light, from the abyss of hell – "They hurried home through a world of black and grey" (Forster 2000a, 175) – to the fullness of heavenly vision. The two realms are explicitly conjured up by Mr Emerson, George's father, in an early exchange with Lucy, to describe the interior restlessness of his son: "A baby is worth a dozen saints. And my baby's worth the whole of Paradise, and as far as I can see he lives in Hell" (24). In

<sup>6</sup> "She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from *Howards End*, she attempted to realize England" (Forster 2000b, 174). In *A Passage to India* Adela observes that "in space things touch, in time things part" (Forster 1985, 199).

<sup>7</sup> In this aspect, as well as in the emphasis placed on Dante's "sincerity" both as a man and a poet, the influence of Carlyle is apparent: "Yet the noble Italy is actually one: Italy produced its Dante; Italy can speak! [...] The Nation that has a Dante is bound together as no dumb Russia can be" (Carlyle 1968, 150).

<sup>8</sup> "[...] after all, love-marriages are made in heaven' 'Yes, Miss Abbott, I know. But I am anxious to hear heaven's choice. You arouse my curiosity. Is my sister-in-law to marry an angel?'" (Forster 2007, 20); "This admirable change in Philip proceeds from nothing admirable, and may therefore provoke the gibes of the cynical. But angels and other practical people will accept it reverently, and write it down as good" (82).

contrast, Lucy's joy at discovering that Mr Emerson had not been told of "the Florence escapade" is conveyed in paradisiac terms: "Lucy's spirits should not have leapt up as if she had sighted the ramparts of heaven" (143).

Similarly to Dante's *Heaven*, in which light is *emblemata* of truth, a visual representation of a beatitude that has its foundation in the act of beholding God, the concept of "vision" constitutes one of the *leitmotifs* of Forster's story: from the view of Florence, referred to in the title, to the English landscape of the family mansion of Windy Corner, "a beacon in the roaring tides of darkness" (177), the protagonist advances on her gnoseological path that amounts to an "ascent," a progressive unveiling of the inner light – "the light within" as Forster puts it in *Howards End* (2000b, 24) – through the slow attainment of a fully Dantesque aerial gaze, the same Forster had described at the end of his Dante lecture. As noted by Mr Beebe, Lucy "had found wings, and meant to use them" (Forster 200b, 87). Not surprisingly, the figure of Dante emerges in the dialogue on the beauty of the English countryside that Lucy entertains in the garden of Windy Corner with Cecil and his rival George. The latter shares an important teaching from his father:

"My father [...] says that there is only one perfect view – the view of the sky straight over our heads, and that all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it". "I expect your father has been reading Dante," said Cecil. (147)

Besides emphasizing the Platonic pattern of Dante's *Comedy*, which recent scholarship has brought to light<sup>9</sup>, the passage also reinforces the role played by Mr Emerson, behind whose words the authorial voice is barely hidden.<sup>10</sup> Just like a novel Virgil, the old journalist guides Lucy through the mists of her own contrasting and impenetrable emotional drives, teaching the young woman that her love for George can be repressed but not eradicated, since "love is eternal" (189). Above all, he reminds the heroine of the true value of an authentic life:

"Your soul, dear Lucy! I hate the word now, because of all the cant with which superstition has wrapped it round. But we have souls. I cannot say how they came nor whither they go, but we have them, and I see you ruining yours. I cannot bear it. It is again the darkness creeping in; it is hell." (189)

[...] "Now it is all dark. Now Beauty and Passion seem never to have existed. I know. But remember the mountains over Florence and the view." (190-1)

<sup>9</sup> See Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, Anna Longoni e John Woodhouse, among others.

<sup>10</sup> The very name of the character alludes to the American transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, the first translator of *The New Life* into English and one of the pioneers of American Danteism.

In line with the etymology of her name, Lucy's newly attained awareness is pictured as enlightenment, a synchronic perception of the existent occurring in an "eternal moment" – "It was as if he had made her see *the whole of everything at once*" (191, my emphasis) – or, in Dante's terms, a truly "paradisiac" view: "Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna, / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna: / sustanze ed accidenti e lor costume / quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo / che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume" (*Par.*, XXXIII, ll. 85-90).<sup>11</sup>

This vision, which represents the greatest form of spiritual broadening, can only be revealed to human eyes via the rediscovery of Nature and the acceptance of corporeity, elements that Forster sees as being inherent to the myth of the South. Against the idealising "medievalism" of Carlyle and Ruskin<sup>12</sup>, who saw in the Middle Ages the highest expression of a harmonious relationship between God, man and the social body, Forster appears rather to endorse Walter Pater's hope for a New Renaissance, invoked, in Dantesque guise, in his insistent appeal to a "New Life". If this modern *renovatio mundi* draws vital energy from the culture of the South, it is not, however, confined to it. Hence the "medieval" characterisation of a man like Cecil Vyse, learned and cultivated, whose passion for Italy, which he tries to instil in Lucy by teaching her the Italian language, turns out to be a simulacrum of his interior death. Skilled in finding "connections" between works of art and aesthetic theories, Cecil proves unable to establish authentic relationships with his fellow human beings, and Lucy tellingly associates her mental image of the young man with an enclosed place, picturing him in a drawing room "with no view" (99). In particular, his greatest flaw lies in a medieval-like asceticism founded on the denial of the body, which, as Forster had elucidated in his lecture at the Working Men's College, Dante only endorsed to a certain extent. Although the Italian poet represents the central figure of the Middle Ages, his political view expounded in *The Empire* was based on the recognition of the equally-important functions of both temporal and spiritual dimensions that, as Forster had emphasized in his speech, derived from the separation of body and soul. Once again Mr Emerson, Forster's *alter ego*, clarifies the terms of the question for the reader's benefit: "I only wish poets would say this, too: love is of the body; *not the body, but of the body*" (189, my emphasis). Since love originates from the body, its sensible guise cannot be laid aside. Beatrice's words are echoed in this notion, for Forster seems to paraphrase a famous tercet from the fourth canto of *Heaven*, in which the woman, luminous and smiling with celestial joy, thus summarises the

<sup>11</sup> "I saw how it contains within its depths / all things bound in a single book by love / of which creation is the scattered leaves: / how substance, accident, and their relation / were fused in such a way that what I now / describe is but a glimmer of that Light" (Dante 1986, 392-393).

<sup>12</sup> The extent of Ruskin's authority is revealed with subtle irony in the scene at Santa Croce, when Lucy wanders in the church with neither Baedeker nor human guidance, in search of the treasures made famous by the Victorian prophet in his study "Mornings in Florence": "There was no one even to tell her which, of all the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave and transepts, was *the one that was really beautiful, the one that had been most praised by Mr. Ruskin*" (19, my emphasis).

Aristotelian theory that celebrated the ennoblement of the senses: "Così parlar conveni a vostro ingegno, / però che solo da sensato apprende / ciò che fa poscia l'intelletto degno" (*Par.*, IV, ll. 40-42).<sup>13</sup> The target of Forster's criticism, therefore, is not so much the Middle Ages, but the Victorian aestheticising "medievalism": Lucy's break with Cecil and her new relationship with George Emerson eloquently mark "The End of the Middle Ages," as reads the title of the last chapter of the novel.

### Fictionalizing Dante: "A Celestial Omnibus"

Another child of the Middle Ages is portrayed in Mr Bons, a character in the short story "A Celestial Omnibus," published in 1911 but written in 1907, the same year Forster was preparing the Dante lecture and completing *A Room with a View*. The tale stands out in the English literature inspired by Dante as the Florentine poet is given fictional status and turned into the "celestial driver" who takes the young protagonist of the story on his second omnibus journey towards a celestial realm. As well as being a witty response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagining of a train journey to the Celestial City in "The Celestial Railroad" (1843), Forster's narrative is a modern rewriting of John Bunyan's dream parable and, at the same time, a significant homage to Dante's poetry. Intrigued by the sign "To Heaven"<sup>14</sup> placed on the edge of an alleyway, the anonymous boy in the story is driven by a strange omnibus to a secular Elysium populated by famous artists and their immortal creatures. From Achilles to the Rhine maidens, from Tom Jones to the Dickensian Mrs Gamp, Forster's chariot retraces the routes of the Western literary canon, thus epitomising a befitting vehicle for the *Sommo Poeta*. While its structure is magnificent and elegant, on the omnibus's walls the city place-names have been substituted with Dante's powerful, albeit disquieting (and slightly altered) verses, *Lasciate ogni baldanza voi che entrate* (Forster 2001, 41).

In fact, as the story unfolds it turns out that the euphoric space of the celestial city, in the vein of Hawthorne's tale, is precluded to those who have not kept their spirit pure, for its delights are only disclosed to the innocent eyes, and ears, of the boy. Once again,

<sup>13</sup> "I speak as one must speak to minds like yours / which apprehend only from sense perception / what later it makes fit for intellection" (Dante 1986, 44).

<sup>14</sup> In Forster's first novel, *The Longest Journey* (1907), the young protagonist Rickie imagines to put a similar sign, "This way to Heaven", at the entrance of a Cambridge garden, which in the narration takes on the sacred function of a *hortus conclusus*: "A little this side of Madingley, to the left of the road, there is a secluded dell, paved with grass and planted with fir-trees. [...] Rickie had discovered it in his second term, [...] the dell became for him a kind of a church – a church where indeed you could do anything you liked, but where anything you did would be transfigured. Like the ancient Greeks, he could even laugh at his holy place and leave it no less holy. [...] If the dell was to bear any inscription, he would have liked it to be 'This way to Heaven', painted on a signpost by the high-road, and he did not realize till later years that the number of visitors would not thereby have sensibly increased" (Forster 1973, 23-4).

before becoming visible, the revelation is first "heard," accompanied by the fading-out notes of Wagner's *The Rhinegold*. In contrast, devoted to a form of futile erudition and false spiritualism, alluded to in the inverted onomastics that links "Bons" and "snob" and in his list of social roles – "churchwarden," "candidate for the County City Council" (30), and "President of the Literary Society" (41) – , Mr Septimus Bons is both deaf to Wagner's music and blind to the heavenly visions, then his otherworldly trip develops into a deadly and infernal journey. As reported in the fictional newspapers mentioned in Forster's coda to the short story – *Kingston Gazette*, *Surbiton Times*, and *Raynes Park Observer* – the body of Mr Bons is found "in a shockingly mutilated condition in the vicinity of the Bermondsey gas-works" (46). Only able to see London, the very epitome of modern man's materialism in Forster's fiction, the man becomes desperate and before falling from the omnibus appeals to the driver to be taken back to "his" world. Dante's response – his only words in the short story – brings the reader to the very heart of Forster's reflection, expressed along the same lines used in the lecture at the Working Men's College:

*"I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life. Stand by yourself as that boy has stood. I cannot save you. For poetry is a spirit; and they that would worship it must worship in spirit and in truth."* (45, my emphasis)

In his fictional rendition, Forster is shifting the terms of Dante's view, for, unlike Dante, in his short story it is not people, but literature and artistic sensibility that act as "windows" or "means to something else" (Forster 1971, 149). In other words, Dante's heaven gravitating around God is here replaced with a literary empyrean, similarly ordered and immortal although "man-centred". By making human creativity its radiating focal point, Forster reaffirms what he had argued in one of his first essays composed in the same period, "Pessimism in Literature" (1907), namely, "In life we seek what is gracious and noble, even if it's transitory; in books we seek what is permanent" (Forster 1971, 145). In this light, literature can represent a way – a "means" – to separate fleeting illusions from lasting truth, hence Forster, like a modern Dante, believes in the "guiding" role played by writers, i.e., in the social impact that their personal literary journeys can have on humanity at large.

At the same time, despite art represents a dream of order to oppose a muddled and complex reality, it is, as Dante warns in "The Celestial Omnibus," only a means and not life; it is not enough to unite "prose" with "passion," to build the "rainbow bridge" (Forster 2000b, 159; Forster 2001, 44) which is often conjured up as the very emblem of Forster's personal and literary vocation. Equally, and even more important is the relational universe, the ceaseless ravelling and unravelling of relations between things and people: as Forster put it in "What I Believe," "I believe in personal relationships. Starting from them, I get a little order into the contemporary chaos" (1972, 66). From the title of an early novella, "Co-ordination" (1912), up to the final pages of *A Passage to*

*India* (1924), the concept of "co-ordination" shapes Forster's fiction and brings it very closely to Dante's poetry: "This universe is supposed to rest on co-ordination, all creatures co-ordinating according to their powers" (Forster 2001, 152). Forster's words indeed articulate a paraphrase of two celebrated tercets from the first canto of *Heaven*: "Le cose tutte quante / hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma / che l'universo a Dio fa somigliante" (*Par.*, I, vv. 103-5),<sup>15</sup> "onde si muovon a diversi porti / per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna / con istinto a lei dato che la porti" (*Par.*, I, vv. 112-4).<sup>16</sup> Despite their differing social and political ideologies, and distant if not irreconcilable worldviews, Dante and Forster seem to share a common attitude towards the relational consequence of both art and human life that Rose Macaulay defines as "mystical," since "both believe in the eternal meanings of human choices, the eternal value of men's relationships with their fellows" (Macaulay 1938, 74).

### Only connect

In one of his early notes on *The Empire*, Forster had termed Dante "ungenial," an author he could not "like," and certainly to "a child of unbelief," as Forster described himself in an essay on Proust (Forster 1938, 98), Dante's ultimate optimism and inescapable medievalism must have appeared outdated and anachronistic. Yet, the influence the Italian poet exerted on his view of literature and human life cannot be underestimated. The terms of Forster's appreciation of Dante both as a poet and a public persona, formerly expressed in the lecture at the Working Men's College, are further clarified in a later essay, "Does Culture Matter?" (1940), in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

Dante wrote over the gates of Hell that they were made by the power, wisdom and love of God:

*Facemi la divina Potestate  
La somma Sapienza e il divino Amor*

and neither the Middle West nor the Soviets nor ourselves can be expected to agree with that. But there is no reason why we should not understand it, and *stretch our minds against his*, although they have a different shape. The past is often *uncongenial* as far as its statements are concerned, *but the trained imagination can surmount them and reach the essential*. Dante seems to me a test case. (Forster 1972, 103, my emphasis)

<sup>15</sup> "Among all things, however disparate, / there reigns an order, and this gives the form / that makes the universe resemble God" (Dante 1986, 4).

<sup>16</sup> "Therefore, they move, all to a different port, / across the vast ocean of being, and each / endowed with its own instinct as its guide" (Dante 1986, 4).

If the past, including its literary expressions, can often appear as an “uncongenial” country, it should be nevertheless understood as a means “to reach the essential,” and not the end. Once again Dante is evoked as “a test case,” a model to look up to by going beyond any epistemic *a priori*: his figure stands out as the very embodiment of the highest notion of culture and of what is “essential” and universally permanent in human life. Only through “the trained imagination,” which writers contribute to shape, can man separate the transient from the everlasting values of humanity, and link the present to the past. Ultimately, it is *Howards End*’s motto – “Only connect” – that provides Forster’s utmost Dantesque rewriting.

## REFERENCES

- ALIGHIERI, D. 1986. *The Divine Comedy. Vol. III: Paradise*. Translated with and introduction, notes, and commentary by Mark Musa. New York-Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- BIDNEY, M. 1976. "Ruskin, Dante, and the Enigma of Nature." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18/2: 290-305.
- BRAND, C.P. 1984-85. *Thomas Carlyle and Dante, Occasional Papers*, 11 (Lecture Delivered to the Carlyle Society): 10-11.
- CAMILLETTI, F. Forthcoming. *Dante's Book of Youth: The Vita Nova and the Nineteenth Century (1840-1907)*. London: IGRS books.
- CARLYLE, T. 1968 [1841]. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. London: Oxford University Press.
- CASELLI, D. 2021. "Modernist Dante". In M. Gragnolati, E. Lombardi, F. Southerden (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, 634-50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FORSTER, E. M. 1936. *Abinger Harvest*. London: Edward Arnold.
- . 1971 [1908]. "Dante". In G.H. Thomson, *Albergo Empedocle and Other Writings*, 145-168. New York: Liverlight.
- . 1972 [1951]. *Two Cheers for Democracy*, in *The Abinger Edition of E. M. Forster*, ed. by Olivier Stallybrass, vol. 11. London: Edward Arnold.
- . 1973 [1907]. *The Longest Journey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- . 1985 [1924]. *A Passage to India*, edited by Oliver Stallybrass. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 2000a [1908]. *A Room with a View*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury. London: Penguin.
- . 2000b [1910]. *Howards End*, edited by David Lodge. New York-London: Penguin.
- . 2001. *Selected Stories*, edited by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell. New York and London: Penguin.
- . 2007 [1905]. *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, edited by Oliver Stallybrass. London: Penguin.
- HELSINGER, E.K. 1982. *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press.
- MACAULAY, R. 1938. *The Writings of E.M. Forster*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- MARRONI, F. 1996. "The Shadow of Dante: Elizabeth Gaskell and *The Divine Comedy*." *The Gaskell Society Journal* 10: 1-13.
- . 2009. "Carlyle, Ruskin e la 'lampada' dantesca: note su Dante e la cultura inglese dell'Ottocento". In F. Ciompi (ed.), *One of Us. Studi inglesi e conradiani offerti a Mario Curreli*, 243-54. Pisa: ETS.
- MCDUGAL, S. Y. (ed.). 1985, *Dante among the Moderns*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- MILBANK, A. 1998. *Dante and the Victorians*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- RUSKIN, J. 1903-12. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- SCHERER HERZ, J. 1988. *The Short Narratives of E.M. Forster*. London: Macmillan.
- WALLACE, D. 2003. "Dante in England." In T. Barolini (ed.), *Dante for the New Millennium*, 422-33. New York: Fordham University Press.
- WOOLF, V. 1942. "The Novels of E. M. Forster," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, 104-112. London: Hogarth Press.

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO

## “WHAT DANTE MEANS TO ME”

*Dante ed Eliot fra i modernisti americani*

**ABSTRACT:** The paper takes its title from a lecture given by T.S. Eliot in 1950, in which he pointed out the lessons Dante had taught him. In fact Dante remains Eliot’s chief model and point of reference throughout his work. His first collections present characters and encounters reminiscent of Dante’s dialogues with the damned and purging souls in the afterlife. Eliot saw in Dante “the great master of the disgusting”, authorizing his own descent into the sordid world of the Sweeney poems of 1920. But Dante is also a guide to an earthly paradise, to bliss and acquiescence in God’s will – states of mind approached in the poems written after Eliot’s conversion, which are meditative soliloquies rather than confrontations with others. In Dante Eliot detected, surprisingly, “the Catholic philosophy of disillusion”, that is, his own somber view of fallen humanity. This position is shared to some extent by Robert Frost (whose characters are often in pain, and whose worldview is dark, if ironic). Other modernists, like Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound, are more optimistic about the pursuit of worldly happiness, and so come well within Protestant tradition. Dante is barely alluded to by Stevens, who attempted to write as if there were no precedent, while the entire project of Pound’s *Cantos* is Dantean, even in the violence of their denunciations and maddening topicality, as well as in their recurrent revelations of a proximate paradise.

**KEYWORDS:** Modernism, Influence, Translation, Hell, Conversion.

### Inferni del Novecento

Dante è letto nell’America del Novecento? Il pubblico colto lo conosce ed è stimolato ad approfondirlo da una serie ininterrotta di traduzioni, anche proposte da autori di richiamo come i poeti di oggi W.S. Merwin, Robert Pinski e Mary Jo Bang (la quale sta riscrivendo la *Commedia* sostituendo i personaggi di Dante con contemporanei analoghi). Presso un pubblico più ampio probabilmente è un nome associato con l’*Inferno*. Forse qualche sua battuta proverbiale diventerà titolo di un film di successo e allora entrerà nelle orecchie del pubblico medio-alto. (Come “Non è un paese per vecchi” di Yeats.) Ma di fatto ciò per ora non è avvenuto. A livello colto letterati e studiosi hanno naturalmente frequentato Dante intensamente e con profitto. Si parla di una scuola dantesca di Harvard dell’Ottocento, e della traduzione classica di H.W. Longfellow, un poeta notissimo ai suoi tempi sui due lati dell’Atlantico e docente di letterature moderne a Harvard, che in Dante vedeva anche il patriota, la guida a una società libera e giusta come doveva essere quella americana. Dalla scuola di Harvard deriva il Dante di Eliot, che del fiorentino fece modello di poesia e di vita, imponendolo a poeti e letterati americani, inglesi e irlandesi (e magari italiani) come lettura obbligatoria.

Alle spalle di Eliot c'è Ezra Pound, che studiò Dante all'università e già nel 1910 ne scrisse con entusiastica partecipazione in *The Spirit of Romance*. Si sa che Pound ambirà a scrivere una nuova *Commedia*, *The Cantos*, dove raccolse le passioni e letture di una vita travagliata che attraversa tutto il secolo. Alcuni suoi "canti" degli anni 1920 presentano un inferno moderno fatto di bigotti, pennaioli venduti, censori, prelati, soprattutto i politici come Lloyd George e Woodrow Wilson responsabili dell'assetto del pianeta dopo i trattati di Parigi (Pound 1995, 61-67; Bacigalupo 2021, 182-186). Pound farà ancora in tempo a denigrare i responsabili del secondo dopoguerra Stalin Roosevelt Churchill, con qualche indulgenza solo per il compagno moscovita (1995, 446). Comunque i *Cantos* seguono faticosamente e con alterno successo il modello della *Commedia*, alternando momenti infernali, invettive bibliche contro l'usura, a paesaggi idilliaci fra Provenza Toscana Liguria e Venezia, in cui prevale l'arte e l'amore (anche nella sua forma sessuale).

Il represso Eliot pesca più sobriamente nel coacervo dantesco. Non pensa come Pound che debellato il nemico della dolce vita tutto sarebbe lusso calma e voluttà, ma verifica dentro di sé un disagio insopprimibile, e lo descrive con un certo distacco ironico. "Scene dall'inferno del Novecento" potrebbe essere il titolo delle sue poesie fino alla conversione del 1927 all'Anglocattolicesimo (era cresciuto nella liberale fede unitariana, che del Cristianesimo conserva il messaggio di fratellanza universale e poco altro).

### Bassifondi barocchi

Eliot andrà oltre nel suo percorso infernale nella raccolta del 1920, *Poems*, anche intitolata (nella prima stampa inglese) *Ara Vos Prec*, con citazione dal XXVI del *Purgatorio*, il celebre incontro con Guinizelli e Arnaut che attraversa come un filo rosso tutta l'opera eliotiana. Nel volume *The Sacred Wood* del 1920 Eliot sottoscrisse una definizione di Dante come "il grande poeta del disgustoso" (1928, 168), e nelle coeve *Poems* segue questa traccia nelle quartine dedicate a un personaggio malavitoso e scimmiesco, Sweeney, che ha la carnalità assente nelle donne dei salotti, è un'altra versione dello spaventoso. Una poesia, "Sweeney fra gli usignoli", ci porta effettivamente in un postribolo, dove sembra compiersi una messa nera o omicidio sacrificale. È la cupa atmosfera dell'immediato dopoguerra. Un nuovo personaggio, Gerontion dell'omonimo soliloquio che apre *Poems* (1920), è un Prufrock uscito da una tragedia giacomiana, barocca, stanco e circondato da un mondo squallido, che riferisce "pensieri di una mente arida in una stagione arida" (1963, 41). Vecchiaia, impotenza. Eliot aveva 31 anni quando scrisse "Gerontion" ma aveva alle spalle la tragedia e follia collettiva della guerra, la sua posizione scomoda di americano a Londra, un matrimonio conflittuale, la tesi della presenza viva della tradizione che andava sempre più approfondendo in saggi influenti come "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). È in questi anni che definisce il suo ideale di poesia "metafisica", cioè unione di sensi e intelletto, e afferma che essa ha conosciuto tre periodi: Dante e il suo circolo, Shakespeare e annessi, i simbolisti francesi

Baudelaire e compagni. Egli legge gli uni attraverso la mediazione degli altri, e Dante rimane il faro anche se afferma che è più opportuno per il poeta mettersi a scuola da un minore geniale come Laforgue (molto influente nelle prime raccolte). "Gerontion" più che dantesco è calato nella retorica (con citazioni) barocca degli elisabettiani e giacomiani, che scrivono in un periodo di crisi come il 1920 e forzano il linguaggio in lunghe opache riflessioni che si attorciano su sé stesse. Ma Gerontion è un'anima in pena, magari in attesa di "Cristo la tigre", che però porta distruzione e violenza fra i personaggi di cartapesta che Gerontion richiama alla memoria: "Mr. Silvero dalle mani carezzevoli, a Limoges...; Hakagawa, chino fra i Tiziano; Madame de Tornquist, nella stanza scura / spostando le candele" (1963, 39-40). Persone, nomi, stanze...

Il soliloquio caro agli elisabettiani viene rielaborato in "Prufrock" e "Gerontion" in chiave dantesca, l'anima che si racconta nelle sue debolezze e visioni, che implicano un giudizio su una società e la storia e condizione umana: "La storia ha molti passaggi ingannevoli, corridoi ed esiti artefatti...". Ci sono spesso metafore spaziali, come se appunto stessimo viaggiando fra gironi e cornici: "La mia è una casa decaduta, / e l'ebreo è accovacciato sul davanzale, il proprietario..." (1963, 39). Versi che hanno valso a Eliot accuse di razzismo, su cui sarebbe lungo discettare. Anche un'altra poesia del 1920 ricorda *Il mercante di Venezia*, sicché il poeta torna a figure archetipiche e tuttavia presenti e inquietanti nell'immaginario del dopoguerra, come in quello di Dante e Shakespeare.

### La galleria dei personaggi

Si sa che l'inferno eliotiano culmina pochi anni dopo in *The Waste Land*, a cui "Gerontion" doveva originalmente servire da prologo. Ma le atmosfere secentesche di "Gerontion" mal si adattano alla scabrosità tutta dantesca di *The Waste Land*, dove non c'è parola che non sia pietrosa (se vogliamo fare eccezione per il centone shakespeariano che apre la seconda sezione: "Il seggio dove sedeva, come un trono brunito, / brillava sul marmo"). Nel saggio su Dante del 1929 Eliot dirà che mentre Dante è relativamente facile da tradurre (e imitare), essendo sempre attaccato all'oggetto, Shakespeare sfugge come un'anguilla giacché le parole brillano di luce cangiante e sono inseparabili e incomprensibili se decontestualizzate. È tutto un linguaggio nuovo, inesausto nelle sue implicazioni e rifrazioni. Laddove Dante procede con realismo e chiarezza, passo dopo passo, terzina dopo terzina (1951, 240-42). *The Waste Land* segue perlopiù Dante, per questo forse è più tradotta e letta dei due soliloqui precedenti. Un inferno abitato da personaggi squallidi e angosciati. L'inferno del 1922 e della vita di sempre: una rovina, ma vissuta e rievocata con il gusto dell'orrido sviluppato nelle poesie del 1920. Sicché *The Waste Land* fece epoca, affascinò, titillò, e commosse con i suoi momenti di pietà della miseria umana:

Highgate mi fé, mi disfecero Kew e Richmond.  
A Richmond sollevai le ginocchia

supina sul fondo di una stretta canoa. (1963, 95)

È una delle tre "figlie del Tamigi" (come Eliot le chiama nelle note [1963, 83] alludendo alle tre wagneriane Figlie del Reno evocate attraverso il loro canto nel testo), commesse o dattilografe o altre vittime di avventure amorose normalmente sordide. La citazione dantesca echeggia esatta, la donna parla di sé con la stessa precisione con cui Pia de' Tolomei ricorda il marito responsabile della sua morte. Eliot ci ha fornito una nuova galleria di personaggi-confessioni memorabili, come quelli che di solito ricordiamo quando pensiamo alla *Commedia*. Il dettaglio fisico delle ginocchia sollevate nell'amplesso è un esempio della continua attenzione di Eliot alle parti del corpo, mani, piedi, ginocchia. I corpi sono anonimi, in serie. La vita è sentita come ripetizione vacua. Se Pia dice a Dante il suo nome, le tre figlie del Tamigi restano anonime, riassumono tutta la loro storia in poche parole. Lezione dantesca, almeno per quanto riguarda Pia, che infatti viene citata esplicitamente, sicché è questa la fonte che ha permesso a Eliot di evocare le sue tre sedotte e abbandonate. (I commentatori non di rado le descrivono come prostitute moderne, il che toglierebbe ai versi molto del loro pathos).

### Conversione e disillusione

Eliot continua a prelevare da Dante nelle poesie della conversione alla fine del decennio. La musicale sequenza *Mercoledì delle Ceneri* con le sue quattro parti mescola liturgia e *Vita nuova*, allegorie bibliche e stilnoviste. Infatti nel suo breve e incisivo studio *Dante* del 1929 Eliot aveva dedicato l'ultimo paragrafo alla *Vita nuova* suggerendo di leggerla *dopo* la *Commedia* per non essere distratti da ricordi preraffaelliti (il medievalismo di maniera dell'Ottocento) e coglierne il realismo di autobiografia trasfigurata alla luce delle "cause ultime", cioè Dio, che illumina la *Commedia* più di tanti commenti (da cui Eliot mette in guardia). La *Vita nuova* è "un buon trattato psicologico su qualcosa di analogo a ciò che oggi chiamiamo 'sublimazione'". La differenza fra Stilnovo e i suoi antecedenti provenzali, suggerisce, ha forse a che fare con la differenza fra albigesi e cattolici, ma sarebbero propri del solo Dante "il contrasto fra amore elevato e carnale, la transizione da Beatrice viva a Beatrice morta che si eleva al culto della Vergine". Nelle pagine apparentemente oniriche della *Vita nuova* Eliot trova anche con soddisfazione

[...] un senso pratico della realtà, che è antiromantico: non attendersi dalla *vita* più di quanto possa dare o dagli esseri umani più di quanto possano dare; guardare alla morte per ciò che la vita non può dare. La *Vita nuova* appartiene al genere della "letteratura di visione"; ma la sua filosofia è quella cattolica della disillusione. (1951, 275)

Così Eliot rivela le sue propensioni religiose e le ragioni della sua conversione a una "filosofia" non lontana da quella che attribuisce a Dante. Lavoro sul proprio vissuto ma

alla luce delle cause ultime, senso della realtà nella sua varietà e complessità ma anche insufficienza che richiede un atto di fede ulteriore. E ci guida a una fresca lettura e interpretazione dei testi danteschi. *Mercoledì delle Ceneri*, pubblicato l'anno dopo il saggio su Dante, lavora sul lato visionario e sul senso di insufficienza ("Signore, non son degno... ma di soltanto una parola"). I testi liturgici ricorrono fra versi spesso senza punteggiatura, che esprimono un anelito. E, come noto, l'incipit unisce Cavalcanti ("Perch'ì no spero") a Shakespeare ("desiderando il dono di uno e l'ambito di un altro", vedi il grande Sonetto 29):

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because I do not hope to turn  
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope... (1963, 95)

Così Eliot congiunge i due periodi "metafisici" più importanti per lui, il Trecento e il Seicento, e rielabora con la forza plastica della sua scrittura. Nel verso di Shakespeare sostituisce *gift ad art*, mentre riprende Cavalcanti con un "falso amico" (*turn*, girare, per *tornar*), e questo girare lo ripete su tre versi per suggerire disperazione e inutile rovello. La speranza è infatti quanto all'uomo darà la fede, la virtù assente.

### Verso una poesia del disincanto

Il "senso delle realtà pratiche" che Eliot sottolinea nella *Vita nuova* è molto in evidenza in un'altra poesia della conversione, "Animula", che inizia a sua volta con una citazione, ma virgolettata:

"Issues from the hand of God, the simple soul"  
 To a flat world of changing lights and noise... (1963, 113)

Di "Animula" esiste una magistrale versione di Eugenio Montale, che però stranamente traduce il virgolettato anziché citare l'originale:

"Lascia la mano di Dio la semplice anima" e volge  
 a un piatto mondo di luci mutevoli e di rumore... (1984, 763)

E dire che Eliot nel citare "Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia" riproduce, come nella citazione di "Perch'ì no spero", proprio la disposizione, in questo caso l'inversione (*Esce di mano / Issues from the hand*). Sarà uno scherzo di Montale, retrotradurre Dante dall'inglese invece di andare al testo principe.

"Animula" descrive con realismo la crescita dell'anima bambina nel suo contesto borghese di primo Novecento, e certo Eliot attinge alla sua esperienza, e la crescita porta alla confusione, alla selva oscura:

ombra della sua ombra e spettro del suo buio,  
 disperde le sue carte tra buio e polvere  
 e comincia la vita nel silenzio che segue il viatico. (Montale 1984, 763-64)

Cioè forse nell'Eucarestia. Qui Montale ripete stranamente "buio" che nell'originale non riappare. In esso c'è invece una triplice rima e forse a questo si deve la ripetizione cacofonica nella traduzione:

Shadow of its own shadows, spectre in its own gloom,  
 Leaving disordered papers in a dusty room;  
 Living first in the silence after the viaticum. (Eliot 1963, 113-14)

Il testo di partenza dice meglio lo stacco fra l'esperienza religiosa e la vita comune. Vi ritroviamo la "stanza" ricorrente in Eliot (espunta da Montale, veramente un po' troppo per le sue). L'uomo mondano lascia di sé "carte disordinate in una stanza polverosa". Donde la necessità di un'altra vita, appunto la Vita nuova.

Eliot scriverà intorno agli anni di guerra un altro poema in quattro parti, *Four Quartets*, che è a suo modo una *Commedia*, un viaggio fra luoghi della sua vita (ogni quartetto è infatti intitolato a una località dove è avvenuta un'esperienza epifanica), l'opera di un solitario che non incontra più personaggi come in *The Waste Land* ma riflette sui tempi della vita e alterna meditazioni quartettistiche a liriche di sapore metafisico. C'è come noto un solo incontro, nell'ultimo quartetto, un rifacimento del confronto di Dante col suo maestro Brunetto. Nell'inferno della Londra del Blitz tedesco Eliot si imbatte nel fantasma di un maestro defunto (molto simile a Yeats che era morto in Francia nel 1939) che gli parla della ricerca artistica e delle pene della vecchiaia, aggiungendo un capitolo all'insufficienza dell'umano registrata in "Animula" e alla "filosofia della disillusione".

## Il poema della terra

L'opera di Eliot costituisce l'episodio più cospicuo e riuscito di dantismo angloamericano. Dante percorre tutti i 116 circa canti di Ezra Pound, che preleva, imita e commenta Dante (molte citazioni dal *Convivio* in un canto del dopoguerra). Pound registra incontri e letture, celebra e danneggia artisti e politici, scrive nel 1944-45 addirittura due bellicosi canti italiani in cui evoca e dialoga con fantasmi come Ezzelino, Marinetti e lo stesso Cavalcanti (1995, 425-31; Brugnolo 2009, 95-111). Genialoide, Pound comunica la sua passione partigiana per Dante modello, e si arrovela su chi mettere in un nuovo Paradiso (Walt Disney addirittura: 1995, 816). La sua non è la filosofia cattolica della disillusione ma quella protestante dell'evoluzione verso un paradiso terrestre, le magnifiche sorti e progressive, che lo condusse a fatali cantonate. Ciò non

toglie che le sue pagine, come si diceva, sappiano spesso offrire squarci di luoghi e personaggi ameni, abbiano una vitalità e furia dantesca spesso assente nell'algido Eliot.

Dante rimane una miniera per questi due sodali. Il tanto più pacato Eliot non negherà mai il suo debito nei confronti di Pound sicché nelle storie letterarie e dantesche del secolo scorso si continuerà a parlare dei due americani che stranamente presero Dante a modello e repertorio. Non è infatti scontato che un poeta di grande originalità lavori su versi e citazioni scritti sette secoli prima. Pochi in Italia lo farebbero (forse Edoardo Sanguineti, eventualmente perché legge Dante attraverso Pound ed Eliot). E infatti gli altri modernisti americani conoscono tutti più o meno Dante ma nessuno lo imita. *L'Antologia di Spoon River* di Edgar Lee Masters, è ben noto, è una sorta di umana commedia in cui le anime si affollano a raccontare le loro storie e cronache in mediocri ma popolari poesie, e Dante vi viene qua e là ricordato. Robert Frost è un assai maggiore cantore di monologhi di anime perse, di momenti di angoscia e cupa riflessione ("Io sono uno che conosce la notte"), e nella sua Nuova Inghilterra non mancano letteralmente selve oscure (il suo ammiratore Josip Brodskij l'ha segnalato: 1998, 83-133). Ma non cita i versi rivelatori, non se ne fa un talismano ricorrente che risponde alle più profonde esigenze del suo essere (come fa Eliot con "e 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace"). Frost trova le formule sue, "una resistenza momentanea contro la confusione" (1995, 777), è protestante ma pessimista e ironico. Ottimista è invece il possente e impervio Wallace Stevens, che sentenziò: "I grandi poemi del paradiso e dell'inferno sono stati scritti, ma il grande poema della terra rimane da scrivere" (1951, 142). E Stevens ci provò: voleva intitolare la raccolta completa delle sue poesie *The Whole of Harmonium* (Tutto l'armonium). L'armonium è un organo portatile, ma la parola accenna ad altre terrestri armonie e soddisfazioni.

Non c'è dubbio come s'è visto che Pound ed Eliot hanno aiutato e stimolato generazioni a leggere Dante, e che i poeti venuti dopo abbiano seguito le loro orme, dall'irlandese Heaney al californiano Duncan (autore di poetici "Dante Études" sul *Convivio*). Robert Lowell, John Berryman, i cosiddetti "poeti confessionali" americani, crebbero sulle ginocchia dei maestri modernisti, seguirono le loro indicazioni e istigazioni (come le chiamava Pound). Magari con una più dolente consapevolezza dell'impraticabilità del modello. Mentre Pound più ingenuamente ed Eliot più cautamente pensavano davvero di poter continuare nella scia di Dante. La grande poesia e visione erano ancora possibili.

### Arte, comprensività, civiltà

Nel 1950 Eliot volle riassumere in maniera laica il suo debito dantesco in una conferenza all'Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Londra intitolata modestamente "What Dante Means to Me" (1965, 125-35). Dante era stato l'"influsso più persistente e profondo sui miei versi", disse, e ricordò la fatica di scrivere il suo rifacimento del dialogo con Brunetto nell'ultimo quartetto e la tecnica che aveva messo a punto per evocare la

terzina nei suoi sciolti (alternare versi tronchi e piani). Disse che Shelley era riuscito assai meglio con le terzine in rima del "Trionfo della vita" e ne fece ampia citazione. Parlò di tre lezioni che Dante può dare al poeta. La prima è la centralità dell'arte, cioè la tecnica del verso, il perfezionamento della lingua di cui il poeta è servo non padrone, cioè il poeta deve sviluppare attraverso il suo magistero le risorse della lingua (come avviene infatti con i nostri classici del Novecento, si pensi per esempio a *Ossi di seppia*). La seconda lezione è "l'ampiezza della gamma emotiva", non solo dalla dannazione alla beatitudine, ma anche "la necessità di esplorare, trovare parole per l'inespresso" partendo da un forte senso della realtà (come s'è visto sopra). Queste due qualità, invenzione ed estensione, conclude Eliot (ed è il suo terzo punto), fanno di Dante il poeta più europeo del continente, "il meno provinciale", quello di cui uno straniero perde meno leggendolo in traduzione (è quanto nel 1929 suggeriva paragonandolo all'indefinito di Shakespeare). Qui emerge il classicismo ed europeismo dell'ultimo Eliot, vincitore del Nobel, coscienza dell'Europa (ed egli affermò di Henry James che paradossalmente solo un americano può divenire davvero europeo, vedi Eliot 1918, 1).

Invece un italiano che legge oggi Dante vi troverà un uomo di parte che della sua provincia fa un contenitore universale e popola di suoi conoscenti i regni ultraterreni, condannando volentieri intere città e regioni che suscitano la sua riprovazione. Un lettore straniero della *Commedia* deve davvero addentrarsi in una selva di fatti e personaggi di un tempo lontanissimo e a stento decifrabile. Dante è sempre preciso nel nominare i suoi interlocutori spiritati, è un poeta autobiografico e idiosincratco. Purtroppo, Eliot ha riaffermato la sua universalità e sostenuto che anche senza capire subito tutto il senso dei versi già il loro suono può essere una rivelazione (1951, 238). E non nasconde di condividere nel profondo alle soglie di un nuovo millennio la visione del destino dell'uomo espressa così vigorosamente da Dante. Una divina commedia.

## REFERENCES

- ALIGHIERI, D. 2013. *Inferno*. Trad. di M.J. Bang. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- BACIGALUPO, M. 2021. "Chi mettere all'inferno? Masters Eliot Pound". In E. Perassi in collaborazione con S. Ferrari, A. Nagin (cur.). *Dante nelle letterature straniere. Dialoghi e percorsi*, 179-188. Milano: di/segni (Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, Facoltà di Studi Umanistici, Università degli Studi di Milano).
- BRODSKIJ, I. 1998. *Dolore e ragione*. Trad. di G. Forti. Milano: Adelphi.
- BRUGNOLO, F. 2011. *La lingua in cui si vanta Amore. Scrittori stranieri in lingua italiana dal Medioevo al Novecento*. Roma: Carocci.
- DUNCAN, R. 1984. "Dante Études." *Ground Work: Before the War*, 94-132. New York: New Directions.
- ELIOT, T.S. 1918. "In Memory of Henry James." *Egoist* 1: 1.
- . 1928. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen.
- . 1951. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber.
- . 1963. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber.
- . 1965. "What Dante Means to Me." In *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, 125-135. London: Faber.
- FROST, R. 1995. *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. New York: Library of America.
- MONTALE, E. 1984. *Tutte le poesie*. A cura di G. Zampa. Milano: Mondadori.
- POUND, E. 1995. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions.
- STEVENS, W. 1951. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Knopf.



ELISA FORTUNATO

# A DIVINE GRAPHIC COMEDY

*Notes on the History of Dante's Adaptations in English*

**ABSTRACT:** The *Divine Comedy* is one of the most famous and timeless narrative poems. It is still being translated into numerous languages and inspiring movie adaptations (from Pasolini to Greenaway), pop and rock music, advertisement, videogames, and graphic novels. The transformations the text has undergone throughout the years reveal several different interpretations of Dante's work and of its meaning. This essay traces a brief history of visual adaptations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the Anglo-American tradition. The last part is devoted to postmodern influences upon contemporary graphic works (in particular, Birk and Sanders' *Dante's Inferno* and Seymour Chwast's *Dante's Divine Comedy A Graphic Adaptation*) and to how these deserve their place in the history of the visual reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, Divine Comedy, Adaptation

The translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* into images is a long-established practice, from the oldest dated and illuminated exemplar of the Trivulzio funds (cod. Triv. 1080) written in 1337/1338 to the postmodern visual 'translations,' and even the contemporary graphic novels and comics. Unfortunately, as Lucia Battaglia Ricci underlines in her precious volume *Dante per immagini. Dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri* (2018), there is no exhaustive record of this tradition, leaving the history of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* fragmented and discontinuous (Battaglia Ricci 2018, xv). Most critics focus on Dante's literary translations, on their adequacy and accuracy, or on their 'unfaithfulness' to the source text, leaving a void with regard to how Dante's work, filtered by a variety of forms and contexts, continues to reach us in unexpected ways.

This relationship and still productive dialogue between Dante and posterity is possible because the *Divine Comedy* retains its visual and visionary power and its universality thanks to Dante's highly poetic voice, his astonishing creative power, and preciseness in describing the human soul and the body politics through his great "economy of words" (Eliot 2015, 712). The economy of style leads him to that attention to detail that, in Eliot's words, is essential to the creation of those *visual images* in which lies the *Divine Comedy's* power to make the reader feel the poet's ideas: "[Dante's] struggle to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange,

something universal and impersonal.” (Eliot 2015, 246). Eliot’s remarks on Dante’s *visual imagination* are the starting point for the brief history of the contemporary visual reception of Dante’s *Inferno* in the anglophone world that I outline here. Lucia Battaglia Ricci has divided the history of ‘visual translations’ or ‘visualizations’ of the *Divine Comedy* into two main categories: illustrated *Commedia* and picture books, and paintings or artworks. These two main categories imply two different kinds of addressee: the former is a kind of visual translation realized on the basis of the artist’s knowledge of the source text and, for that reason, a dialogue with Dante’s original and text is always established and images are always associated with the text; while the latter are autonomous works of art which assume a competent viewer who has to know the *Comedy* in order to decode them correctly. The scholar calls these two categories respectively: *cohabitations* and *relocation* (Battaglia Ricci 2018, xvii). While in the interplay between *cohabitations* and *relocations* she examines the re-readings each century has made of the *Divine Comedy*, I focus here on how the contemporary ‘visualizations’ lead to a merging of the two categories and, in so doing, address a new audience of viewers and readers able to recall – not through the mediation of the source text but thanks to the interplay between the artists’ word and visual ‘rewritings’ – that impressive repertoire of enduring human traits (Casadei 2021, 11) that the *Divine Comedy* depicts.

As regards the British reception of Dante, it comes as no surprise that in England (after British humanism had espoused Boccaccio and Petrarch rather than Dante and the Renaissance), where the fear of Dante had led to his falling into a sort of oblivion (Boitani 2011), Dante re-emerges at the end of the eighteenth century thanks to a painter, Joshua Reynolds. The latter’s famous painting *Count Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon* (1773) was the catalyst for what has been called *Ugolino fever* and paved the way for the first unabridged literary translation of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>1</sup> From Joshua Reynold’s *Count Ugolino* onwards, the history of the literary translations of the *Divine Comedy* becomes strictly linked with its visual translations.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the nineteenth century the *Divine Comedy* relocates from its ‘house’ of words to its ‘house’ of images assuming a competent viewer able to access his or her cultural memory. A century later, the Texan artist Robert Rauschenberg gets back to the idea of relocating Dante but at the same time lets him cohabit with a text, a novel sort of ‘third path.’

In 1958 Rauschenberg embarked upon the project of creating thirty-four illustrations for the thirty-four cantos of Dante’s *Inferno*. He spent two years working on his ‘combines’ in complete solitude in a “shack that sticks out over the water”<sup>3</sup> in Florida.

<sup>1</sup> See Bugliani-Knox 1997; Wallace 2007.

<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, one need only think of the drawings by Füssli, Flaxman, and Blake of Ugolino in the Torre della Fame and of the Paolo and Francesca story.

<sup>3</sup> “Dear Maxime, I wanted you to know that I finished the 34 (last) canto last nite [sic] and thank you for likeing [sic] the ones you saw. It was an exciting boost. I’ve just been working very hard. Live in a shack

Soon after his return to New York, his Dante drawings were displayed at the Leo Castelli Gallery (on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1960), where each plate was accompanied by a summary of the canto written by Michael Sonnabend (Krcma 2017, 23). The intention of ‘illustrating’ the *Commedia* and of creating an immediate link between the illustrations and what we have called ‘the cultural memory’ of the viewer was manifest. The role of the viewer is, in fact, of primary importance in Rauschenberg’s artwork, his art ‘combines’ common objects (such as chairs, pillows, or stuffed animals) with graphic signs, paint, and watercolor: “this refuse collected from the streets of New York was Rauschenberg’s ‘visual archive’, ‘his public art of collective memory’.” (Francini 2011, 323). A ‘collective memory’ which he creates through a process of collaboration “among the various elements, between artist and, notably, between all of the above and viewers.” (Hunters in Francini 2011, 324) The language he used to ‘translate’ Dante has been called “polysemic language” because it is “abstract and referential at the same time” (Francini 2011, 325); echoing the Dantean language in the final vision of the third canticle, in which we see *res* and *verba* linked in a non-rational logic dimension but, rather, by analogies and symmetries in a two-way movement, from the idea to its last actual manifestation and vice-versa (Casadei 2010, 64-65). Various registers and worlds clash together in Rauschenberg’s vision: “canonical authority and popular culture, ancient and modern, Christian and secular, structural order and improvised contingency” (Krcma 2017, 34) are found in the same plate and, in a way, they represent the artist’s effort to “make whole what has been smashed.” (Benjamin 2003, 392).

This attempt to recreate the unity of the *Commedia* and, in so doing, to create a brand-new ‘whole’ in a pop vision also underlies Tom Phillips’ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno. A Verse Translation by Tom Phillips with Images & Commentary* (1983). While Rauschenberg chose to accompany each drawing with Sonnabend’s summary, in order to encourage “the viewer towards a readerly engagement” (Krcma 2017, 23), Phillips, twenty years later, produced an *artist book*, in which he did everything himself (the translation, the illustrations, and the scheme of the three volumes). Phillips explicitly chooses to dialogue with Dante and with the whole tradition of visual translation that separates him from Dante (with particular reference to Doré). He uses collages and balloons to produce a divine pop comedy where the vision of and the world described by the Florentine poet are mixed up with the icons and visual imagination of our contemporary world.<sup>4</sup> Phillips uses a heterogeneous

---

that sticks out over the water. Lots of sun and slosh. I’ll be home soon. Love, Bob.” A postcard to Maxime Groffsky, 12 November 1960, in Krcma 2017, 23.

<sup>4</sup> In 1990, Tom Phillips embarked on a TV series project with the director Peter Greenaway, *Inferno* (A TV Dante) where his illustrations would become electronic and linked with photographs of real landscapes and actual events, inspiring in the TV viewer unexpected associations between the Dantean imagination and our current life and reality. Their aim was to produce a video version of the first canticle

variety of materials from his everyday world: postcards, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc. and, in this way, he shows us a sort of journey which is his personal journey both through life and through Dante's cosmos. Although, like Rauschenberg, he uses a set of materials from his own world, he does not create an alternative history as Rauschenberg does by referring to contemporary politics, but he, as Ciccuto points out, searches for "internal meanings" in order to bring "to light features of the original." (Ciccuto 2021, 9).<sup>5</sup> It is interesting here to note how Phillips links the language of the comics to Dante, in particular, in the panels XXII/2 and XXII/4 where the reference to American comics is explicit. In XXII/2 the British artist reads Dante as a *war reporter* and chooses to use a page layout typical of comics in which the image of a devil (*Inf. XXI*) is positioned at the center. Most of the elements are taken from «Combat» comics: the march, the assault, the retreat described by Dante in the first lines of the canto are 'translated' into comic images of a trench war with soldiers, helmets and firearms. Dante's own recollection of the battle of Campaldino (1289) has been turned into the contemporary viewer's memory of World War II. In XXII/4, Phillips' indebtedness to comics becomes crystal-clear. The artist reproduces William Blake's watercolor of the quarrel between the devils Alchino and Calcabrina, who fall into pitch (*Inf. XXII*), using the typical comic style, and, through the help of Paul Tupling, creates a panel in which the two devils resemble Superman and Batman clashing with one another and producing a loud "Shooooom".<sup>6</sup> In this way he creates a link between the *Commedia* and comics. In line with Lichtenstein's, Warhol's and Ramos's "appropriation of superhero, war, and romance comics for their Pop Art" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 27), Phillips transforms comic heroes – at that time still associated mostly with younger readers – into a piece of fine art aimed at an educated viewer, thus paving the way for adaptations of the *Divine Comedy* in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

---

of the *Divine Comedy*, a sort of video journey through Dante's netherworld. In the project, the soundtrack plays an important role: being juxtaposed to the framed images, it forms a sort of contemporary commentary to the text.

<sup>5</sup> A similar strategy is employed in Rachel Owen's artwork (Illustration for Dante's *Inferno*), where the artist tries to create a juxtaposition of Dante and the viewer of her images and of her, the artist, and the pilgrim's guide. She achieves her goals on the one hand through the removal of the figure of Dante from her pictures to create a first-person viewing experience and, on the other hand, by assimilating Virgil and Beatrice into her own self-portrait. See Bowe 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "This image takes as its starting point not Doré's often plundered illustrations but Blake's eccentric version, and develops the latter's naive comic-book characteristics? : SHOOOOM! is of course an inversion of the standard WOOOOSH!", <https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/shop/from-dantes-inferno/item/6327-canto-xxii-4-fighting-devils>

<sup>7</sup> In particular, if we embrace the definition of comics McCloud gives us in *Understanding Comics*: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, 9), where letters and words are "images arranged in deliberate sequence" as well as drawings. That is to say, the boundaries between comics and graphic adaptations are blurred since both are examples of sequential art (Eisner, 1985).

Phillips' and Rauschenberg's legacy affects reworkings of Dante in our contemporary world. In fact, it seems to me that the never-ending web of 'postmodern' quotations and allusions and the cohabitation between the verbal and the visual have engendered two fine works of adaptation of *The Divine Comedy*: the three-volume *Dante's Divine Comedy* (2004, 2005) by Birk and Sanders and *Dante's Divine Comedy. A Graphic Adaptation* (2010) by Seymour Chwast. Both, in line with Rauschenberg and Phillips, blend the high culture to which the *Commedia* is usually linked and *mass culture* (Baronti Marchiò 2014), addressing a sort of in-between audience of readers and viewers who are neither highly cultivated nor wholly unversed. Birk and Chwast rework the postmodern lesson in two very different ways. The former revives the typical Pop Art transformation of popular culture into something new and significantly different and uses everyday objects, motel signs or advertising boards as "statements on society, indicators of the emptiness of America, signifiers of the banality of culture" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 42). Seymour Chwast, on the other hand, produces a much less 'disturbing' book, which draws on a 1930s America depicted in his peculiar *push pin* style, and the web of quotes he creates is not intended as a critique on our contemporary world but a refined, humorous take on the graphic novel genre.

In my opinion, they succeed in producing fine art-products for mature readers<sup>8</sup> which deserve their place in the history of the visual reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

In analyzing these two graphic adaptations, I embrace Baetens and Frey's starting point, namely that the *graphic novel* (and graphic adaptations in a broader sense) is both a genre and a medium, and as a consequence I take into consideration the crucial role played by form, content, and publication format (Baetens and Frey 2015, 8).

Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders<sup>9</sup> produced a beautiful edition of the *Commedia*, in which the illustrations depict a contemporary urban hell. Birk organizes his panels in single-page format; each is centered on a page parallel to the text adaptation, in line with

---

<sup>8</sup>In the twenty-first century, the *Commedia* has been 'remediated' (Baronti Marchiò 2014, 121) through a variety of literary genres and media, thus epitomizing a perfect example of a never-ending debate with the past which produces a fertile dynamic between "immutability and change" (Baronti Marchiò 2014, 125). As mentioned above, the number of rewritings in the anglophone world is vast and includes numerous wonderful pieces of work, from John Agard and Satoshi Kitamura's *The Young Inferno* (2008) to Patrick Waterhouse and Walter Hutton's *The Divine Comedy: A Natural History* (2010), and many comics, as for example Jimbo's trilogy (1988, 1997, 2004) by Gary Panter, Gary Reed's *Sin Eternal. Return to Dante's Inferno* (2016), and Joseph Lanzara's *Dante's Inferno* (2016). I will not take account of these interesting adaptations since they are addressed to a younger or less cultivated audience and, as a consequence, often lose the complexity of the source text, demoting Dante to a 'brand'.

<sup>9</sup>Sandow Birk is a painter and visual artist. In 1999 he was awarded a Getty Fellowship for painting, which was followed by a City of Los Angeles (COLA) Fellowship in 2001. He was an artist in residence at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC in 2007 and at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2008. Marcus Sanders is a contributing editor to *Surfing* magazine, and assisted on *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*.

the tradition of illustrated editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In fact, referring in particular to the first volume, *Dante's Inferno*, the authors establish right from the beginning "an ironic relationship with the austere Doré engravings" (de Rooy 2017, 102). Together with Dante, Doré is thus the reference point, for Birk and Sanders in their actualization and vivification of *The Divine Comedy*. The content matter is 'adult' and the intended readers are middle-aged people, stuck in-between adulthood and a sense of nostalgia for their previous life; in fact, the pilgrim is a young American man with a sweatshirt and torn jeans who "about halfway through the course of" his "pathetic life" wakes up and finds himself "in a stupor in some dark place" and is "not sure how" he "ended up there", guessing "I had taken a few wrong turns." The *dark wood* has become a not well-defined *dark place*, the pilgrim's life is *pathetic*, and the right road is lost and gone because of "a few wrong turns" taken by a "pretty tipsy" Dante. The whole *livre d'artiste* is made through a skillful combination of images and a brand-new version of the original text. The free-verse 'translation' is a successful attempt to actualize Dante's poetry into what has been called "a linguistic vernacular accessible to a contemporary American audience" and, in this way, the authors succeed in reflecting Dante's *volgarizzamenti* thanks to the use of "American slang"<sup>10</sup> mixed with a selection of contemporary historical references" (Olson 2013, 149). While the text, to quote only one example, mentions Jimmy Swaggart<sup>11</sup> among the sinners that Minos has assigned to the second circle, where the souls of Lustful are tossed forever upon a howling wind, and Dante exclaims: "What the fuck! [...] I mean, I thought love was supposed/to be the best thing in the whole world. How can they deserve/this kind of punishment just for being in love with each other?" (V, vv. 100-103) listening to Francesca's story, Birk's drawing shows Virgil and Dante embracing, with the former's reassuring arm around the latter's back as they observe the sadly ever-floating couple. The pilgrim and his guide, like the damned couple and the souls of the Lustful, are taken from Doré's 1861 illustrations.<sup>12</sup> Birk 'quotes' the French artist's engravings in almost all his drawings and, in so doing, declares his indebtedness both to Dante's poem and also to Doré's illustrated edition of the *Commedia*. If Doré's main achievement was the new and emotional depiction of the landscape, which prevails over the characters, this is also Birk's goal. The American artist aims to use the *Commedia* to show his audience a world where globalization and consumerism have prevailed over human beings. Birk's *Dante's*

<sup>10</sup> It is important to underline that Birk asked Sanders to help him with this project precisely because he is a surf journalist and, as a consequence, would be able to enrich the American vernacular with a hint of Californian surf language.

<sup>11</sup> Jimmy Lee Swaggart is an American evangelist who, in the 1960s started transmitting a weekly telecast that, in the course of a few years, became a daily TV-program which, by 1983, was broadcast by more than 250 TV stations. In 1988 Swaggart was involved in a series of sex scandals involving prostitution.

<sup>12</sup> Gustave Doré attached great importance to the first canticle (75 illustrations for the Inferno, 42 for the Purgatory and only 18 for the third canticle), and Birk follows Doré in paying more attention to the Inferno than to the other two canticles.

*Inferno* – but also his *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio* – gives the reader a contemporary urban landscape overfilled with trash containers, gas stations, laundromats, and fast-food logos. In this way, on the one hand he engages our critical judgment by forcing us to look at our own dystopian world<sup>13</sup>; on the other hand he follows the path taken by Pop Art, which had reshaped understanding of mass consumer products. Advertising boards, traffic signs, commercial logos together with abandoned strollers and cash machines here are invested with meanings and permeated with criticism of hypercommercialism. As the art critic Doug Harvey has underlined (Harvey 2004), Birk follows the French artist not only by referencing his engravings, but also by following Doré’s path as an artist. What I mean is that Doré has been labelled as the first author of narrative pictorialism, accomplishing, in so doing, a double goal: on the one hand that of producing an artwork, on the other that of telling a story. Doré’s visual storytelling has been seen as a sort of first graphic narrative, able, like contemporary graphic novels, to address both the highbrow and the lowbrow. In this way, the nineteenth century French artist laid the foundation for the contemporary graphic novel aesthetics and created the basis for a reception theory where the audience contributes to the meaning of the text by their reading and interpretation. Moreover, Doré’s illustrations were widely distributed but to a wealthy middle-class public of connoisseurs, a previously unimagined market at that time. The French artist “wanted to produce a lavish, expensive edition using high-quality materials and craftsmanship, with a final price almost ten times higher than his previous most expensive title” (Harvey 2004, VIII). Birk followed this path by creating a multifaceted art product where highly expensive materials and luxurious binding enclose a treasure trove of images of poverty, decay, disruption, and homelessness. His *Inferno* describes a disturbing, polluted world in a permanent state of war, which is inhabited by outsiders and misfits, while the wealthy reader able to afford the expense of the finely bound book is a spectator who, if he listens to this warning, could still opt for action and even change the world he or she inhabits.

Seymour Chwast’s *Dante’s Divine Comedy* is not a dystopian warning. It was published in 2010, and it is a more ‘classic’ graphic novel. As regards form, to a certain extent Chwast follows the fundamental structure of comic books: the “images are juxtaposed in a grid, which intertwines horizontally and vertically organized images that are supposed to be read in sequential order” (Baetens and Frey 2015, 8); but, it is worth noting, he rises above these ‘rules’ with the help of some graphic ‘wit’ (characters that leap from one panel to the other, the two-page spread drawing of the thieves entangled with the reptiles of the Seventh Bowge, and the ever-changing layout of each page). Chwast’s drawing style is minimalist – in line with his *push pin style* which involves

---

<sup>13</sup> With reference to Canto V, for example, Dante and Virgil are on the edge of a cliff that overlooks a destroyed metropolis, surrounded by helicopters and a sinister smoke trail that reminds us of the war scenes we have become accustomed and even inured.

experimentation with the revival of historical graphic styles (from Victorian to art deco) -<sup>14</sup> and led to his graphic novel receiving a mixed critical response when it was released: its detractors see in it a sort of ‘summary’ of the original poem compressed into little more than one hundred pages, an extreme simplification and concentration of the original narrative, while enthusiasts underline its interesting rearrangement of the original in a new and humorous way (Paladin 2006). The drawings are organized in multi-panel pages and the word-image combination gives much more space to images (words are used just for labelling each canto, or as extremely short lines in the mouth of each character or, to quote Magritte, as the captions to some drawings). In this way, the author seems to rely on drawings more than on words to give his graphic novel a narrative dimension, even if the creative interaction of images and words is of crucial importance. In fact, organization of words and balloons is always part of the drawing; the word layout is embedded in the images or reflects the panel structure. The two basic elements of the graphic novel, the narrative and the composition (Baetens and Frey 2015, 108), are perfectly blended and combine to produce the final result.

Humor pervades the book thanks to graphic devices (such as arrows and drawings spilling out of the frames and into the gutters) which link the panels but, in particular, the key to this humorous but incisive remediation is the association of Dante the pilgrim with the stereotype of the hard-boiled detective: with his trench coat, sunglasses, pipe and fedora, Chwast’s Dante reminds us of Philip Marlowe, the protagonist of *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler (de Rooy 2017, 104) or a Dashiell Hammett detective (Biasolo 2017, 100), that is a man searching for the truth; while Virgil, with his bourgeois suit and his bowler hat is a sort of Magritte character ready to investigate the perilous zone which lies beyond our everyday logic.<sup>15</sup> This game of associations broadens to include the entire world of Chwast’s *Divine Comedy*, passing through “speakeasies, burlesque theatres, and carnivals, encounters dapper dons, pug-nosed thugs, and gangster molls” (Fugelso in de Rooy 2017, 104).<sup>16</sup> In *Inferno V*, for example, Paolo and Francesca become two anonymous lovers discovered by a Gianciotto Malatesta in vest and underpants who is squeezing a beer-can in one hand and holding a sword in the other, directly recalling a gangster film. Chwast loses all the complexity that permeates the episode and flattens (or crushes, in line with his graphic style) the

---

<sup>14</sup> Seymour Chwast is an American illustrator and graphic designer. In 1954, together with Milton Glaser, he founded the Push Pin Studios in New York. Chwast is famous for his commercial artwork, which includes posters, food packaging (the first McDonald’s Happy meal packaging), magazine covers (The New Yorker, The New York Times), and publicity art; he is also a prolific children’s book illustrator, see Heller 2020; Chwast 2004.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that René Magritte chose Fantômas, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre’s character, as a sort of alter ego in most of his mature artworks.

<sup>16</sup> Chwast chooses the Thirties not by chance, but because they are far from and at the same time similar to the Middle Ages depicted by Dante, sharing with it the sins of the Dantean characters, see Biasolo 2017, 100.

web of responsibility, choice, and human tragedy. We could list a large number of examples of this kind, from *Inferno VII* where the Hoarders and the Spendthrifts roll huge rocks against one another while a man in a car – that looks like a 1930s convertible – throws away bundles of banknotes to *Inferno XXX* where Adam of Brescia is portrayed as a sort of Rockefeller with a moustache and plaid jacket while he is struggling of thirst in a sort of pool of money (resembling that of Disney’s Uncle Scrooge).<sup>17</sup> The American artist thus gives the public a sophisticated yet accessible book where Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and in particular the first canticle, is no longer a hell on our earth (as in Birk and Sanders’ adaptation), nor a commentary on our contemporary history, but one of the infinite afterlives<sup>18</sup> available to the *Divine Comedy* thanks to its extraordinary ability to combine reality and vision, and thus to achieve what Walter Benjamin called *fame*: “The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame”. (Benjamin 2000, 71)

## REFERENCES

- AGARD, J., SATOSHI, K. 2008. *The Young Inferno*. London: Frances Lincoln Children’s Books.
- BAETENSEN, J., FREY, H. 2015. *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BARONTI MARCHIÒ, R. 2014. “L’Inferno di Dante tra tradizione, marketing e cultura popolare”. In *La parola del Poeta. Tradizione e ‘ri-mediazione’ della ‘Commedia’ di Dante nella cultura popolare*, edited by V. Salerno, 117-140. Avellino: Edizioni Sinestesia.
- BATTAGLIA RICCI, L. 2018. *Dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri*, Torino: Einaudi.
- BENJAMIN, W. 2000. “The Task of the Translator” [1923]. In L. Venuti (ed.). *The Translation Studies Reader*, 15-23. London: Routledge. Originally published in W. Benjamin. *Die Aufgabe der Übersetzung*. Ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980.
- . 2003. “On The Concept of History” [1942]. In H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings (eds.). *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940, 389-400. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- BIASOLO, M. 2017. “‘Molto più della storia che rappresenta’. Alcuni esempi di riscrittura a fumetti e in *graphic novels* della ‘Divina Commedia’ dal secondo dopoguerra ad oggi”. In S. Lazzarin, J. Dutel (eds.). *Dante Pop. La ‘Divina Commedia’ nella letteratura e nella cultura contemporanea*, 91-106. Roma: Vecchiarelli editore.
- BIRK, S., SANDERS, M. 2004. *Dante’s Inferno*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- . 2005. *Dante’s Purgatorio*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- . 2005. *Dante’s Paradiso*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

<sup>17</sup> The illustration omits the quarrel between him and Sinon of Troy but is able to capture the terrible rancor gnawing at the forger’s soul and his unfulfilled desire for revenge.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as a process, “as an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new. [...] it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own.” (Hutcheon 2006, 20).

- BOITANI, P. 2011. "Dante in Inghilterra". *Critica del testo*: XIV, 3: 227-242.
- BOWE, D. 2021. "Hell, a Pilgrim's-Eye View". In D. Bowe (ed.). *Rachel Owen. Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 80-97. Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing.
- BUGLIANI-KNOX, F. 1997. "Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse: Nineteenth-Century English Translations, Interpretations and Reworkings of Dante's Paolo and Francesca". *Dante Studies* 115: 221-250.
- CASADEI, A. 2010. "Dante nel Ventesimo secolo (e oggi)". *L'Alighieri* 35: 45-74.
- . 2021. "L'Inferno contrappuntistico di Tom Phillips". In T. Phillips. *Dante's Inferno*, ed. by G. Bacci, 11-17. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- CHWAST, S. 2004. *The Push Pin Graphic, A Quarter Century of Innovative Design and Illustration*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- . 2010. *Dante's Divine Comedy*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- CICCUTO, M. 2021. "Gli spazi aperti della memoria nell' 'Inferno' dantesco di Tom Phillips". In Tom Phillips. *Dante's Inferno*, edited by Giorgio Bacci, 7-11. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- DE ROOY, R. 2017. "Divine Comics". *European Comic Art* 10/1: 94-109.
- EISNER, W. 1985. *Comics and sequential Art*. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press.
- ELIOT, T.S. 2015. "Dante" [1929]. In *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition (1927-1929)*, edited by F. Dickey, J. Formichelli and R. Schurchar, 700-745. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2015. "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" [1927]. In *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition (1927-1929)*, edited by F. Dickey, J. Formichelli and R. Schurchar, 245-260. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- FRANCINI, A. 2011. "Transferring Dante. Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations of the 'Inferno'". In *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, edited by A. Casadei, 323-337. Kant: Verlag Turia.
- HARVEY, D. 2004. "Sandow Birk's Fast-Food Inferno". In *Dante's Inferno*, edited by S. Birk and M. Sanders, VI-X. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- HELLER, S. 2020. *Seymour Chwast. Inspiration and Process in design. Text by Steven Heller*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- HUTCHEON, L. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge.
- KRCMA, E. 2017. *Rauschenberg/Dante. Drawing a Modern Inferno*. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.
- LANZARA, J. 2012. *Dante's Inferno: The Graphic Novel*. Belville, New Jersey: New Arts Library.
- McCLOUD, S. 1994 [1993]. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- OLSON, K. M. 2013. "Dante's Urban American Vernacular: Sandow Birk's 'Comedy'". *Dante Studies* 131: 143-169.
- PALADIN, N. 2016. "Push Pin dante: La Divina Commedia reinterpretata da Seymour Chwast". *Arabeschi* 7: 263-267.
- PHILLIPS, T. 1985 [1983]. *Dante's Inferno. The first part of the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, tr. Tom Phillips, London: Thames & Hudson.
- PHILLIPS, T. "Dante's Inferno. Notes on this work". <http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/works/artists-books/item/5287-dantes-inferno/>, web (accessed May 5, 2022).
- REED, G. 2016. *Sin eternal. Return to Dante's Inferno*. Caliber Comics.
- WALLACE, D. 2007. "Dante in English." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by R. Jacoff, 281-304. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WATERHOUSE P., HUTTON W., 2010. *L'Inferno di Dante: Una Storia Naturale*. Milano: Mondadori.

MARCO FAZZINI

**DELVING 'UNDERGROUND'***Dante, Heaney and their companions*

**ABSTRACT:** More than one contemporary Irish poet becomes anxious when quoting Dante, not only because Dante is the unsurpassable poet of all times, but also because Heaney's improvisations on the Florentine poet appear, in Ireland, to carry more weight than the work of the Italian poet himself. The path Heaney followed in his 'research' mainly meant 'digging' into the depths of history, language and myth. Dante, in particular, had surely not been studied by Heaney before he studied Hopkins and Frost, Hughes and Hardy, MacDiarmid and Larkin, MacCaig and Maclean, all the poets Heaney had read and, in part, even met before producing some of his middle- and late-career masterpieces. From the very beginning, Heaney's 'underground' theme was his personal process of 'digging'. In his interviews and essays, Heaney often quoted the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and his insights into the 'underground' were often presented as spatial and symbolic contraries: surface/underground; high/low; light/darkness, outside/inside, hell/heaven; demon/angel, etc. The attraction to Dante and the presence of the Florentine poet as a background influence on Heaney's poetry is here underlined by exploring some of his key collections and poems.

**KEYWORDS:** Heaney, Underground, Dante, Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, Contemporary Poetry.

In a long early interview, Heaney stated: "I believe that what poetry does to me is comforting... if I read the *Divine Comedy*, the *Purgatorio*, it's in the highest, widest, deepest sense, *comforting*, Great art is comforting, in some odd way" (Haffenden 1981, 68). In his interviews and essays, Heaney often quoted the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and his insights into the 'underground' were often presented as spatial and symbolic contraries: surface/underground; high/low; light/darkness, outside/inside, hell/heaven; demon/angel, etc. The attraction to Dante and the presence of the Florentine poet as a background influence on Heaney's poetry is evident, at least, from the early Seventies (Oldcorn 1989, 261-7). The poet himself, in an extensive interview with Karl Miller, observed:

I was exhilarated to read Dante in translation in the Seventies, because I recognised some of the conditions of Medieval Florence – the intensities, the factions, the personalities – as analogous to the Belfast situation. Farinata rising out of the tomb could be Paisley. The combination of personality, political fury, psychological realism. All the voices speaking, and the accusations flying, the rage and the intimacy of *The Inferno*. I didn't think, immediately I read the poem, 'Aha! We can work with this.' The poem has the desiderata of high art, it is jubilantly at work in its medium, and at the same time has the interest of realist narrative. Eventually, however, it did present itself as an example, a way to be true to what was going on inside myself and outside myself. (Miller 2000, 34)

According to Kratz, more than one contemporary Irish poet becomes anxious when quoting Dante, not only because Dante is the unsurpassable poet of all times, but also because Heaney's improvisations on the Florentine poet appear, in Ireland, to carry more weight than the work of the Italian poet himself. When dealing with Medieval texts and overlapping new and contemporary concerns, Heaney always sympathised with outsider figures like Sweeney, Dante and Grendel (Kratz 2011, 20). Talking with Carla De Petris, Heaney pinpoints the beginning of his interest as 1972 when he read Dorothy Sayers's translation of Dante. He recalled that he followed that by reading everything he could find about Dante, including the famous *Speech on Dante* by Maldelstam. Through those readings, he became convinced that Dante had managed to marry two apparently unmatchable elements: the contemporary individual 'cry' and the political passion implied in the Italian poet's attacks against corruption and greediness. In short, Dante was capable of mixing the individual's needs with his political context through a dramatic, poetic force (De Petris 1989, 72).

If we pay attention to what Heaney wrote about his 'sense of place' and the way in which he observed and read poets such as Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill, among others – poets who can master their own part of the English landscape and create different "Englands of the mind" – we are reminded how a precise technique of representing and delving into local geographies can mingle with the oral and aural heritage of a place, especially when a passage from surface to underground locations takes place (Heaney 1980, 150-69). Following his train of thought, and the development of his writing career, we can easily discern that Heaney was faithful to those first strategies for a long time. He paid a particular attention to other poets, such as the Scottish writers Norman MacCaig and Hugh MacDiarmid, or the Irish poet Richard Murphy, or the Welsh poet David Jones, because they all contained something intriguing and mysterious – a "kind of image or visionary thing" (Haffenden 1981, 61) – when referring to their respective local cultural identity. Considering his long career retrospectively, Heaney had the County Derry dialect and the Ulster Scots idiom he heard in County Antrim at the back of his ear, as well as the language of the Irish poem *Buile Shuibhne* that he translated as *Sweeney Astray* (1983), the Gaelic Highlands and the oral Scots culture of Sorley Maclean and Iain Crichton Smith, the Old English as registered in the epic poem *Beowulf*, the English patrimony he could read in Wordsworth, Hopkins and Hardy, the American accents of Elizabeth Bishop, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, and, finally, the work of wonderful translators such as Dorothy Sayers, John D. Sinclair and Charles S. Singleton, who had sweated over Dante's *Comedy*.

The path Heaney followed in his 'research' mainly meant 'digging' into the depths of history, language and myth. Dante, in particular, had not been studied by Heaney before he studied Hopkins and Frost, Hughes and Hardy, MacDiarmid and Larkin, MacCaig and Maclean, all the poets Heaney had read, and, in part, even met before producing some of his middle-and-late-career masterpieces. From the very beginning, Heaney's "underground" theme was his personal process of "digging". It inaugurated his "vertical" investigations, his delving into the mystery of writing and ancestry. Heaney's "digging" is

not the only notable trope in his 1966 collection, *Death of a Naturalist*: "...Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging"; "...I wanted to grow up and plough, / To close one eye, stiffen my arm"; "Love, I shall perfect for you the child / Who diligently potters in my brain / Digging with heavy spade till sods were piled / Or puddling through muck in a deep drain"; "As a child, they could not keep me from wells / And old pumps with buckets and windlasses. / I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells / Of waterweed, fungus and dark moss."; and "...I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing"; etc.). There is also the determined descent into darkness in the 1969 collection *Door into the Dark*: "My sleeves were rolled / And the air fanned cool past my arms / As I swung and buried the blade, / Then laboured to work it unstuck"; "All I know is a door into the dark"; "...I rippled and I churned / Where ditches intersected near the river / Until he dug a spade deep in my flank / And took me to him"; "...By day, / only the drainmaker's /spade or the mud paddler / can make him abort. Dark / delivers him hungering / down each undulation"; "It underruns the valley, / The first slow residue / Of a river finding its way. / Above it, the webbed marsh is new, / Even the clutch of Mesolithic / Flints"; and "The ground itself is kind, black butter / Melting and opening underfoot, / Missing its last definition / By millions of years". Again, in his 1972 volume, *Wintering Out*, we encounter: "He fords / his life by sounding. / Soundings"; "Soft voices of the dead / are whispering by the shore / that I would question / (and for my children's sake) / about crops rotted, river mud / glazing the baked clay floor."; and "I could risk blasphemy, / consecrate the cauldron bog / our holy ground and pray / him to make germinate / the scattered, ambushed / flesh of labourers..."; etc. Often, when talking about "darkness", Heaney would stress its possible rewards, its positive aspect, as it happens in the following observations related to his first two books:

I thought of 'the dark' in the second title as a conventionally positive element, related to what Eliot called 'the dark embryo' in which poetry originates. The phrase 'door into the dark' comes from the first line of a poem about a blacksmith, a shape maker, standing in the door of a forge; and, as a title, it picks up on the last line of *Death of a Naturalist*, where the neophyte sees a continuity between the effect he wants to achieve in his writing and the noise he made when he used to shout down a well shaft 'to set the darkness echoing'. There's also the usual old archetype of the dark as something you need to traverse in order to arrive at some kind of reliable light or sight of reality. The dark night of the soul. The dark wood. (Heaney 2008, 95)

The descent into that darkness (Dante's *selva oscura*) is, for Heaney, a descent into the very unconscious dimension of creation and musical resonance (a 'well', an underground 'river'; his local 'bog', etc.), the place where one can set 'the darkness echoing', or where he might experience the physical and psychological crossing of a 'dark wood' that leads to light. This is, possibly, the reason why, quite early in his career, Heaney was attracted to MacDiarmid and his long poem, *On a Raised Beach*, in particular. In that work, MacDiarmid used his newly created 'synthetic English' and managed to relocate the focus of Scottish literature through a complex philosophical and poetical

vision. *On a Raised Beach* is unique in its slowly unwinding argument about the precarious balance between the attentive mind and opaque matter, pushing the reader into unknown areas of conjecture and insight with an intoxicating linguistic mix. In it, the poet's investigation is absolutely vertical: the ambition was to go as deep as possible into the essence of the physical world, to the very *haecceitas* of the stones. This was done mainly through an experimental language which slowly reveals its numerous etymological strata, trying to preserve its oral origins or, as Heaney has it, a "phonetic patterning which preceded speech and authenticated it, a kind of pre-verbal register to which the poetic voice had to be tuned" (Heaney 2002a, 301).

Heaney adopted a similar admiration when reading and writing about Geoffrey Hill in the 1960s and early 1970s: what Hill did with Offa in his *Mercian Hymns* – Heaney wrote that "Offa's story makes contemporary landscape and experience live in the rich shadows of a tradition" (Heaney 1980, 160) – was all-important not only for his own small prose volume called *Stations* but also for his future strategies of "archaeological" excavation and psychological probing into the world of "shadows". Henry Hart noted that Heaney backed "the modernist and formalist tenets that aimed for a mimesis or at-one-ment between dense and verbal constructs and the world's body, between poetic paradox and historical and psychological divisiveness" (Hart 1989, 809). We know now that Heaney's *Stations* was delayed just because of Hill's publication of *Mercian Hymns*, a book that the Irish poet, as one of the first dedicated critics of Hill's poetry, discusses on the basis of those "attempts to touch what Wordsworth called 'spots of time', moments at the very edge of consciousness that had lain for years in the unconscious as active lodes of nodes" (Heaney 1975, 3). Later on, in *Preoccupations*, Heaney writes: "There is in Hill something of Stephen Dedalus's hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations, as sounds to be plumbed, as weights on the tongue. Words in his poetry fall slowly and singly, like molten solder, and accumulate to a dull glowing nub" (Heaney 1980, 160). With regards to his process of excavation into language/s, history and shades, one of the first extensive articles on Heaney as a "digger" contained the following idea: "The spade – whether it be the spade of the archaeologist, farmer, or turf-cutter – descends into darkness to bring what is buried to the light" (Stallworthy 1982, 163).

Of another of his poetical heroes, Norman MacCaig, Heaney observed: "He was a great fisherman, a master of the cast, of the line that is a lure. And the angler's art – the art of coming in at an angle – is there in his poetry too. He could always get a rise out of the subject. He made it jump beyond itself" (Heaney 2002a, 399). Heaney's use of the fisherman's line under the surface of the water hinted at the obliqueness of his own technique of in-depth exploration when it is used as a tool to probe hidden and internal feelings and dreams, either hauled up "at an angle" from the unconscious or taken up from an historical line "that is a lure". One of the many examples may be *The Salmon-Fisher to the Salmon*, where the angler searches for hidden enlightenment not with a spade or divining rod, but rather with rod and line (Stallworthy 1982, 164). This search, for Heaney, often meant delving into the history of a language or languages, even the lost and forgotten ones, but also the excavation of a larger and atavistic tribal memory that

can be fished through the excitement of “feeling the bite”, the “depth of it”, as he observes in *Stepping Stones*: “But the depth of it was inestimable. The nibble on the worm, the tugs, the arc and strum of the line in the water, the moods of the water and the moods of the weather. I loved being on the riverbank” (O’Driscoll 2008, 94). A few lines from one of the poems (*Shore Woman*) included in his *Wintering Out* are particularly relevant here:

My line plumbed certainly the undertow,  
loaded against me once I went to draw  
and flashed and fattened up towards the light... (Heaney 1972, 66)

Following the same line of influence, Heaney was equally attracted to another great Scottish poet, Sorley Maclean, who he knew by reputation because of his mingling of poetry and politics, his renovation of the Gaelic poetic tradition in Scotland, and the personal and linguistic destiny of his Gaelic community. Then, in the early Seventies, as Heaney himself recalls, “two things occurred which made the spark jump: I read Iain Crichton Smith’s translations, *Songs to Eimhir*, and I heard Maclean himself read his own poems in the original Gaelic” (Heaney 1986, 1). In his poem *Would They Had Stayed*, Heaney remembers his friend by writing:

Sorley Maclean. A mirage. A stag on a ridge  
In the western desert above the burnt-out tanks. (Heaney 2001, 68-9)

Heaney’s admiration and love for Maclean’s poetic gifts led him, finally, to translate one of his masterpieces: “Hallaig”, “a poem with all the lucidity and arbitrariness of a vision... rose like a mist over the ancestral ground in which this poet’s taproot is profoundly lodged, a poem of almost familial intimacy arising out of a naturally genealogical imagination, embodying all the fidelities implicit in the Irish word ‘*dúchas*’” (Heaney 1986, 2). In that visionary poem, Sorley Maclean conjures up the shades of his ancestors and claims support from local places, vegetation, and presences of his own tribe in the deserted island of Raasay. Here, as is the case in many of Heaney’s poems, the path is one of descent into history and conscience. As Heaney himself observed, that poem “belonged to the world of Eliot’s ‘*Marina*’, Rilke’s Orphic sonnets, indeed to the metamorphic world of Orpheus himself” (Heaney 1986, 1). Orpheus’s descent into Hades to see his wife links that ancient Greek story with Virgil’s rendition, but also with Dante’s inclusion of Orpheus into a short list of poet-theologians who could be met in the *Inferno* (IV, 132). Obviously, in Maclean’s “Hallaig” one might find all the tragic historical dimensions of the decadence of original locations together with the clearance of Maclean’s homesteads by a landlord who stands for all those who contributed to the shrinking of the Gaelic language and culture in Scotland and in Ireland:

I will wait for the birches to move,  
The wood to come up past the cairn

Until it has veiled the mountain  
Down from Beinn na Lice in shade.

If it doesn't, I'll go to Hallaig,  
To the sabbath of the dead,  
Down to where each departed  
Generation has gathered.

Hallaig is where they survive,  
All the MacLeans and MacLeods  
Who were there in the time of Mac Gille Chaluum:  
The dead have been seen alive,

The men at their length on the grass  
At the gable of every house,  
The girls a wood of birch trees  
Standing tall, with their heads bowed. (Heaney 2002b)

Maclean's evocation of and dialogue with the shades of his ancestors proved a particular fascination for Heaney, inviting him to reproduce the cadences and cries of a shared tragic mismanagement of a local economy, so that the poem evoked "a setting of deserted wallsteads, houses with roofs fallen in and gardens and outgoings all overgrown with shrubs and nettles, the kind of thing you used to see everywhere in Ireland, in the south and west especially, although there was just such a ruined dwelling on land very close to our own place in Derry" (Heaney 2008, 426). This is an extreme cry for the preservation of a lost and mismanaged local language, a stand of poetic camaraderie and a strategic spinning of a thread that could link his voice not only with his Scottish friends and consciences but with a larger well of influential sources, voices, and shades, Dante included. "If the Beatrice of Dante's *Commedia*", Heaney observes, "is more cosmologically centred, at once more densely allegorical and diaphanous, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*, being closer to the moment of encounter in Dante's life, is closer to the muse of the Eimhir poems" (Heaney 1986, 4). This is strengthened by his reference to the shrinking of Gaelic language and to the battle for its renewal. So, as a kind of extreme cry for the renewal of Gaelic ancestry, Heaney's *The Gaeltacht* rewrites Dante's *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io*, one of the early sonnets written by Dante, even before his *Vita Nuova*, a work dedicated to Guido Cavalcanti. The mysterious atmosphere of Dante's poem is here transposed into the Irish poet's familiar context not only to praise love and personal feelings but to stress the urgency of 'talking Irish', and reunite, on a single boat, friends, a shared language and a local 'gabble' that might function as a larger metaphor to describe a sea voyage through islands and continents. This is achieved through a dive into a personal, linguistic memory:

I wish, *mon vieux*, that you and Barlo and I  
Were back in Rosguill, on the Atlantic Drive,  
And that it was again nineteen sixty

And Barlo was alive

And Paddy Joe and Chips Rafferty and Dicky  
Were there talking Irish, for I believe  
In that case Aoibheann Marren and Margaret Conway  
And M. and M. and Deirdre Morton and Niamh

Would be there as well. And it would be great too  
If we could see ourselves, if the people we are now  
Could hear what we were saying, and if this sonnet

In imitation of Dante's, where he's set free  
In a boat with Lapo and Guido, with their girlfriends in it,  
Could be the wildtrack of our gabble above the sea. (Heaney 2001, 44)

As Panzera observes, in “the closing lines of the poem, Heaney invokes Dante and his company in their sea vessel in order to refine the sound (“wildtrack”) of those former conversations (“babble”) between him and his old friends, heard with the maturity of the ‘people [they] are now’” (Panzera 2016, 207).

In *Field Work* (1979), apart from presenting his attempt to translate one of the most famous ‘encounters’ of the *Comedy*, Heaney had already introduced his first reference to Dante in a poem called *The Strand at Lough Beg*. It was dedicated to his cousin Colum McCartney, killed by loyalist paramilitary troops when walking alone on a mountainous road, near Lough Beg, “the proper place to encounter Colum’s shade” (Heaney 2008, 221). An imaginary meeting is included in the final part of the poem, where Heaney references Virgil wiping Dante’s face at the opening of the *Purgatorio* as he writes of cleansing his cousin’s violated face with dew and moss:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (Heaney 1979, 18)

In fact, Heaney himself revealed that the inspiration for that poem came from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, “describing that little lake and rushy shore where Virgil and Dante find themselves once they emerge from the murk of hell... I couldn’t not connect it with my own strand, so that the last bit of the poem was the first bit to be written” (Heaney 2008, 221). On this poem, Marco Sonzogni has observed that it contains all the shaded tones of an elegy rather than the vengeful ones of a political attack, some years before Colum McCartney cast a dark shadow on the Irish violence in the eighth poem of *Station Island*

(Sonzogni 2016, 1007). It also happens in a fragment (“In the Afterlife”, part of a longer poem called “Bodies and Souls”) where Jim Logue, the school caretaker, is remembered by Heaney through the following words: “Was that your name / On a label? Were you a body or a soul?” (Heaney 2001, 73). Moreover, “An Afterwards” sets Heaney in the ninth circle of the *Inferno*, for “the domestic treachery of too great a devotion to his art” (Corcoran 1986, 129). In the same book, in “Leavings”, we are presented with Thomas Cromwell in one of hell’s circles (“Which circle does he tread, / scalding on cobbles, / each one a broken statue’s head?”) whereas “September Song” opens with a precise translation of Dante’s “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*”.

*Field Work* also included the translation of the final part of Dante’s Canto XXXII and the whole section of Canto XXXIII of *Inferno*, the ones dealing with Ugolino della Gherardesca. Roberto Mercuri has observed that this tale regarding Count Ugolino’s death inside the Muda Tower in Pisa, and his vindication against Ruggeri in the *Inferno*, are a clear denunciation of the tribal fights of the times, when the cruelty of Italian political life caused personal and individual tragedies (Mercuri 2021, 392-3). Heaney relates that while he was reading the *Inferno*, Kieran Nugent, imprisoned in 1976 for hijacking a bus and for being an IRA member, had started his ‘dirty protest’ (refusing prison clothing and refusing to clean out his cell) against the decision of the British Government to treat IRA prisoners as criminals rather than political prisoners (Heaney 2008, 425). Those protests and hunger strikes inspired Heaney, and he remembered that “the whole business was weighing on me greatly already and I had toyed with the idea of dedicating the ‘Ugolino’ translation to the prisoners”. However, after meeting a Sinn Fein spokesman who charged him with the accusation, “You never write anything for us”, he felt that he was being “commanded”, and what he “felt as a gift... was suddenly levied” (Heaney 2008, 258-59). Here, the speaking voice (Dante? Heaney?) offers Ugolino to report his story “in the world above” so that his name can be cleared. Again, the alternation of the two voices in a dialogue stresses the dichotomic movement ascent/descent (“I have no idea who you are / Nor how you ever managed your descent”), recalling *Purgatorio* 14, 1.1 (“Chi è costui che ‘l nostro monte cerchia ...”) and hinting at the possibility that what human languages or communication media report might not be the real ‘truth’, especially when political and economic interests clash with the ambitions of power.

In Heaney’s poems, there are many other quotations, loans and rewritten lines from Dante, before and after his collection *Field Work*. It would take too long to discuss all of the poems here, but a short list might be useful for any kind of perusal: “A Dream of Solstice”; “A Retrospect”; “Alphabets”; “An Afterwards”; “Anything Can Happen”; “Audenesque”; “Bann Valley Eclogue”; “Canopy”; “District and Circle”; “Electric Light”; “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge”; “Keeping Going”; “Known World”; “Leavings”; “Limbo”; “Loughanure”; “Out of This World”; “Sandstone Keepsake”; “Seeing Things”; “Squarings”; “The Ash Plant”; “The Birett”; “The Crossing”; “The Early Purges”; “The Flight Path”; “The Journey Back”; “The Little Canticles of Asturias”; “The Loaning”; “The Mud Vision”; “The Riverbank Field”; “The Schoolbag”; “The Strand”; “The Walk”;

“Triptych”; “Wheels within Wheels”.

Various critics have underlined the evidence that Heaney’s three major works (*North*, *Station Island* and *Seeing Things*) have re-enacted the three books of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. *North*, in particular, represents a descent into the ‘inferno’ of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, a ‘hell’ made up of bombs, killings and terrorism. In those years, as Heaney himself observed, “the Dantesque allowed the barbarities of Belfast and Ulster to commingle with certain Mediterranean translation, the visits and so on” (Carvalho Homem 2001, 28). Like Dante, Heaney lived in a conflicted relationship with his native land. He condemned himself to a kind of self-exile when he decided that he didn’t want to live in his country anymore, looking for other geographical and social alternatives. So, in *North*, Heaney questions the role of his poetry in difficult Irish times and how his poetry could overcome such conflicts, wondering if his decision to leave his ‘north’ was the right one, and feeling guilty for that abandonment. Like Dante, at the end of his collection Heaney finds the spark that might inspire future generations, so moving from the darkness of a violent society to the light of a promising re-surfacing.

The title of the opening poem of *Station Island*, “The Underground”, recalls the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, including a marginal reference to Dido and Beatrice (Kratz 2011, 74-75). In *Station Island*, we are in a kind of *Purgatorio* because here the poetic persona talks with ghosts and shadows, giving them a voice. Stephen Wade has observed that this kind of technique “was quite clearly to link a coherent and unified sequence of poems that have confrontations and reiterations (as in Dante) to the idea of a pre-designed discipline like the Stations of the Cross, with its fourteen poses and disciplines” (Wade 1989, 62). By moving among these ghosts, Heaney, as one penitent among a crowd of pilgrims, constructs a series of dialogues and tries to answer some of his existential questions, even though the “difference between Heaney and the other penitents is that he is no longer a believer” (Vendler 1988, 161). One of the shades has even the courage to accuse him: “What are you doing here ...?”. Maria Cristina Fumagalli has underlined that not only is *Station Island* like the *Purgatorio* but that it can be considered “a sort of miniature of the Divine Comedy”. In fact, by following Dante’s footsteps, Heaney’s persona starts a journey through the underworld, becoming an independent artist with his own personal vision. Heaney himself, in his article called *Envy and Identifications*, confessed that he would not have written *Station Island* if he hadn’t become entranced with Dante’s poem (Heaney 1985, 9), explaining how his attempt to imitate Dante and his will to write about his feelings for his own country could flow into a new poetic strategy. This can be summarised through two “often contradictory commands”:

...to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped that I could dramatise these strains by meeting shades from my own dream life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to recognise those claims. They could probe the validity of one’s commitment. (Heaney 1985, 18)

This is the end of Canto II of the *Inferno*: “Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo / chinati e chiusi, poi che'l sol li 'imbianca, / si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo, / tal mi fec'io di mia virtude stanca, / e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse, / ch'io cominciai come persona franca [...]”, ll. 127-132. In section VI of *Station Island* Heaney directly translates this to communicate his debt to Dante:

*As little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,  
So I revived in my own wilting powers  
And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.*  
Translated, given, under the oak tree. (Heaney 1984, 76)

*Seeing Things* opens with a translation of an excerpt from *Aeneid IV*. Here, Aeneas asks the Sybil of Cumae to descend into the reign of Dis and meet his dead father, so Heaney tries to enlarge his vision to those invisible presences in his life, including one of his favourite poets, Philip Larkin:

[...] I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty.

Whereas the first poem in the *Crossings* section is a projection of Canto I of Dante's *Inferno*, at the end of the last poem the speaker describes his journey back home after a march, with Michael Longley, for civil rights in Newry in the wake of Bloody Sunday, giving us the opportunity to compare it to Dante's crossing of Acheron:

We were like herded shades who had to cross  
And did cross, in a panic, to the car  
Parked as we'd left it, that gave when we got in  
Like Charon's boat under the faring poets. (Heaney 1991, 94)

The massing of shades and presences also recurs in *District and Circle*, the title poem of Heaney's 2006 collection. This is, again, set in the London Underground, as was “The Underground” in *Station Island*. Here, “the classical echoes were going to be heard, and the underground/underworld/otherworld parallels come into play” (O'Driscoll 2008, 410). Andrew Motion has observed that this is a “Dante-esque labyrinth of the Underground... the journey of an alert and nervous individual, as he tries to define what is durable and true about his loyalties. It is a poem about faith, which never uses the word” (Motion 2006). A tin-whistle player is playing, aware of the poetic persona's presence, knowing him as being a poet, possibly a fellow Irish artist. The poem describes not only their shared art, but the progressive descent into darker and darker dimensions of Dante's circles (“a corridor I'd be walking down...”; “another level down, the platform thronged...”; “So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging...”), until a visionary encounter appears in front of the persona's eyes: “My father's glazed face in my own

waning / And craning...". The District and Circle lines of the London Underground frame the contextual dimension of the poem where we cannot forget about 'shadowy' and deadly omens, when the two lines converge at Edgware Road station, the site of the terroristic attack of 7 July, 2005. Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* offers a refreshing inspiration and a model for the encounter with a father, but also a final meeting with death, in the middle of a throng ('a human chain') that has all the sense of the life-in-death progression of TS Eliot's *Waste Land* ("Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet..."). Heaney's final part of the poem only offers us a flickering vision, yet a possible mirrored escape up to light:

And so by night and day to be transported  
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict  
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,  
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed  
By blasted weeping rock-walls.

Flicker-lit.

The poem helps the reader to be aware "of the mythical dimensions of all such journeys underground, into the earth, into the dark" (O'Driscoll 2008, 410). McCarthy has underlined that Heaney, once again, has created an opportunity to meet his father, as he had done in *Seeing Things*, if only "this time in his own reflection" (McCarthy 2008, 62), in a place where he could "more or less ghostify myself" because he had learned that, "from the human beginning, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region – not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life" (O'Driscoll 2008, 472). We are facing a kind of prelude to the final descent into the Avernus in *Human Chain* ("silent now as birdless Lake Avernus"), as it happens in the twelve-poem sequence of *Route 110*, where the persona is "parrying the crush with my bagged Virgil", in the middle of the Smithfield Market racks of suits "like their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge". As Boitani has observed, this is a voyage through Hell, and there's no escape towards any kind of light, with no chance or way out to contemplate the stars of Purgatory (Boitani 2016, xcvi).

As his last attempt with Dante's *terza rima* – a metric form Heaney could not manage to keep to for too long, "because I didn't know Italian, because I couldn't gauge tone, because I was at a loss about all the little particles strewn around the big nouns and verbs..." (O'Driscoll 2008, 425), as he himself confessed speaking about his idea of trying to translate the entire *Inferno*, or the entire *Commedia* some years earlier – he wrote his personal memory for his friend Bill Cole, a poet, writer and LPs collector of Irish origins. Following Dante's skills in his triplets, "Bill Cole's LPs" (see *Irish Pages*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014), a revised version of in "Memory of Bill Coles" (which was originally published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2001, and subsequently published in *The Clifden Anthology* and *The Irish Time* on the anniversary of Heaney's death) is Heaney's

imagined dialogue with Cole's shade ("...imagined him and me / Meeting again in an earthly paradise"). That get-together is shaped after Dante's entry to Purgatory, when the Italian poet meets his friend Casella's shade. Here, Heaney seems to have followed one of his favourite poets' achievements: Philip Larkin's "Talking in Bed", as Heaney himself noted, "goes back to the greatest foreign poet of the second millennium, to Dante Alighieri and to the rhyme scheme of *The Divine Comedy*", inspiring him to find a perfect triple stitching of the rhymes. Heaney's rhymes musically link the various triplets, resulting in perfect rhymes (Purgatory/memory; song/long/gone; poetry/me/6b; revery/Derry; voice/Joyce; etc.) so that each line insists on the very topic of the poem whose conclusion is triple locked, as in Larkin, by three words: "Beg", "young", "song". It's the portrait of two friends meeting and enjoying themselves inside an off-Broadway flat ("a book grotto, his cove of revery") where singers, LPs, and chats could evoke the very music of their original places: Co Derry, the rivers Moyola and Avonmore, the village of Avoca, etc. This is a final and imagined return to his loved home, the 'omphalos' that had inspired most of Heaney's early works, the place where linguistic music is mixed with the poetical and musical flow of time and memory, crossing influences and models, from the early Medieval European writers up to his contemporary precursors, so that song, youth and water might evoke a joyful re-surfacing from Hell's darkness:

River rhyming, over-brimming, young  
At heart, and younger song by song.

## REFERENCES

- ANDREWS, E. (ed.). 1992. *Seamus Heaney. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- BOITANI, P. 2016. "Dalla terra al vento." In S. Heaney. *Poesie*. Ed. by Marco Sonzogni, xi-c. Milano: Mondadori.
- BUTTELL, R. 1975. *Seamus Heaney*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- CARVALHO HOMEM, R. 2001. "An Interview with Seamus Heaney." *The European English Messenger* X/2: 24-30.
- CORCORAN, N. 1986. *Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber and Faber.
- CURTIS, T. 1985. *The Art of Seamus Heaney*. Bridgend: Dufour Editions.
- DE PETRIS, C. 1989. "La pausa per la riflessione. Incontro con Seamus Heaney." *Linea d'Ombra* 42: 69-73.
- FUMAGALLI, M.C. 1996. "'Station Island'. Seamus Heaney's *Divina Commedia*." *Irish University Review* 26/1: 127-142.
- . 2001. *The Flight of the Vernacular. Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi.
- GARRAT, R.F. 1995. *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*. New York-London: G.K. Hall & Co.
- HAFFENDEN, J. 1981. *Viewpoints. Poets in Conversation*, 57-75. London: Faber and Faber.
- HAWKINS, P.S., JACOFF, R. (eds.). 2002. *The Poets' Dante. Twentieth-Century Responses*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- HEANEY, S. 1975. *Stations*. Belfast: Ulsterman Publications.

- . 1980. "The Sense of Place." In *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978*, 131-149. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1984. *Station Island*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1985. "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review* 15/1: 5-19.
- . 1986. "Introduction." In R. J. Ross, J. Hendry (eds.). *Sorley Maclean. Critical Essays*, 1-7. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- . 2001. "Time and Again: Poetry and the Millennium." *The European English Messenger* X/2: 19-23.
- . 2002a. *Finders Keepers. Selected Prose 1971-2001*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2002b. "Hallaig" (translated by S.H.). Portree: The Sorley Maclean Trust (privately printed).
- HART, H. 1989. "Crossing Divisions and Differences: Seamus Heaney's Prose Poems." *Southern Review* 25/4: 803-821.
- KRATZ, M.G. 2011. *O Poet Guiding Me. Dante and Contemporary Irish Poetry*. Heidelberg: Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Neuphilologischen Fakultät der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität.
- MCCARTHY, Conor. 2008. *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry*. Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer.
- MERCURI, R. 2021. In Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*. Torino: Einaudi.
- MEYER, C. 1989. "Orthodoxy, Independence and Influence in Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*." *Agenda* 27/1: 48-61.
- MILLER, K. 2000. *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with K.M.* London: Between the Lines.
- MORRISON, B. 1982. *Seamus Heaney*. London-New York: Methuen.
- MOTION, A. 2006. "'Digging deep'. On Seamus Heaney's *District and Circle*." *The Guardian*, April 1, 2006. 11.12.2006. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/poetry/0,1744077,00.html>
- O'DRISCOLL, D. 2008. *Stepping Stones. Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber and Faber.
- OLDCORN, A. 1989. "Approssimazioni e incontri. Il dantismo di Seamus Heaney." *Lecture classensi* 18: 261-84.
- PANZERA, D. 2016. "Dante's Legacy. Kinship between Languages in Seamus Heaney's Poetics." *Estudios Irlandeses* 11: 199-212.
- SONZOGNI, M. 2016. "Notes." In S. Heaney, *Poesie*. Edited by Marco Sonzogni, 955-1141. Milano: Mondadori.
- STALLWORTHY, J. 1982. "The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney." *Review of English Studies* 33/130: 158-174.
- VENDLER, H. 1988. *The Music of What Happens. Poems, Poets, Critics*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- . 1998. *Seamus Heaney*. London: Fontana Press.
- WADE, S. 1989. "Creating the Nubbed Treasure (*Station Island*)." *Agenda* 27/1: 62-71.



ANTONELLA FRANCIANI

# LIKE A MEDIEVAL JOURNEYMAN WITH HIS POEM IN HIS HAND

*Dante's Presence in Charles Wright's Poetry*

**ABSTRACT:** Charles Wright is one of the contemporary American poets who have most profoundly absorbed Dante's *Commedia* into their work. This paper places Wright's interest in Dante in context, focusing on *Purgatorio* as the canticle he relates to most in his poetry, and as the book closest to his own poetics. Examples taken from various texts support this reading of Wright's relationship with the medieval Florentine poet.

**KEYWORDS:** Wright, Dante, American Poetry.

Among the multitude of ways in which Dante has continued to flourish in the poetry of the United States since the end of the Eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> Charles Wright's response stands out among contemporary American readings, translations, imitations, interpretations, and appropriations of the *Divine Comedy* and the *Rime*. Wright has experienced the three main approaches to Dante that have marked the Florentine poet's reception in America over the last fifty years. In so doing, he falls within the long-standing tradition of using Dante as a canonical figure in which to mirror one's poetics and the cultural trends of an age. These three groups include the poet-translators,<sup>2</sup> the poets who

---

<sup>1</sup> The first translation from the *Comedy* to appear in the United States was a passage from *Inf.* 33, the famous episode of Count Ugolino, published in the *New York Magazine* in 1791 by William Dunlap, a writer, painter, and theatre impresario. The American translation of the three canticles was first accomplished by Henry W. Longfellow, who completed it in 1867.

<sup>2</sup> The translators include renowned figures such as: Robert Pinsky who has, in his words, 'Englished' *Inferno* in 1994, moving away from the original *terza rima* to get "speed and efficiency" and make readers feel "Dante's great rapidity and fluidity" – a method that has made his lively bilingual version a best-selling book (see Pinsky's comments on his translation in Pinsky 2007, 42-46); William Stanley Merwin, a Pulitzer-Prize winning poet and prominent scholar and translator of Medieval and Romance literature, who published his *Purgatorio* in 2000; Mary Jo Bang, who is the author of a freewheeling and questionable rendering of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, published respectively in 2012 and 2021. Bang brings the two books closer to here-and-now readers with anachronistic references to, for example, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, Freud and Nietzsche, Donald Rumsfeld, and Steven Colbert, arbitrarily condemning historical figures to eternal punishment or purgatorial expiation. To mimic the original's plurilinguism, she inserts lines by authors of all ages, from Bob Dylan to Lord Byron, Lewis Carroll, and Emily Dickinson.

have adopted the architecture of the *Comedy* in their works,<sup>3</sup> and the poets who have freely re-used Dante's imagery, language, and characters, often moving away from the original or alluding to it only vaguely.<sup>4</sup>

Wright could, with good reason, be included in each of these three categories as the author who has most and most consistently absorbed Dante's lesson in contemporary verse. Although he tried his hand at translation only in 1993, rendering in English *Inf.* 13 and 14,<sup>5</sup> Wright has declared Dante's presence in his writing "a glittering sediment under everything I do," "dispersed and dissipated" among his lines since his apprentice years in

---

This group should also include a classic edition of *Inferno*, assembled in 1993 by poet and editor Daniel Halpern, introduced by James Merrill, and translated by twenty poets, all American except for Seamus Heaney: Mark Strand, Galway Kinnell, Cynthia Macdonald, Amy Clampitt, Jorie Graham, Charles Wright, Richard Howard, Stanley Plumly, C.K. Williams, Robert Pinsky, Susan Mitchell, Carolyn Forché, Richard Wilbur, W.S. Merwin, Alfred Corn, Sharon Olds, Deborah Digges, Robert Hass, and Halpern himself.

<sup>3</sup> Standing out in this second group is the name of James Merrill, with his trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover*, an immense epic poem in three parts and a coda, composed between 1976 and 1982, which records the Ouija board sessions during séances that Merrill and his partner David Jackson conducted with a crowd of spirits from the other world. Among African American poets, Le Roy Jones/Amiri Baraka looks at Dante's narrative sequence and recasts, with only one significant variation, the *Inferno* scheme (borrowed from John Sinclair's 1961 translation) in his autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965). The original structure provides him a guideline to his lyrical narration of Black people's infernal experience, which is much worse than that of the sinners in Dante's book. The structure of the *Comedy* reappears in another trilogy, Frederick Seidel's *The Cosmos Trilogy* of 2002, which collects three earlier books. In his sequence, Seidel inverts Dante's itinerary and humorously begins his postmodern epic without hope in the heavens, journeying over a paradisiacal New York on board modern vehicles and spacecrafts to gradually descend into the neo-inferno of a violent and degraded post-9/11 Manhattan. This itinerary is scanned by the 33 poems of the first two volumes and the 34 poems of the third part, where Dante and Virgil appear in the final 100<sup>th</sup> poem, thus echoing the original structure of Dante's cantos.

<sup>4</sup> This is the largest group, and it includes an extraordinary range of rewritings of Dante's poetry for all tastes, from the Medieval Dante to Dante in popular culture. If the Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück titles her 1999 book *Vita Nova* to talk about a love that is gone, Pulitzer Prize winner Yusef Komunyakaa dedicates a poem of 100 lines, "Flesh", to an unusual Beatrice who, divested of her role as the poet's muse, reclaims her womanly identity. Her words provide an original self-portrait at the same time as they give the author's comment on poetical inspiration and the relationship with tradition.

Critics have asked why the *Comedy* is a text so often used and abused in the United States. David Gewanter writes that over the years it has remained an aesthetic ideal that "challenges any poet to create a total vision of the world," proving that the dead have more to say than when they lived" ("Dante 2006: The Contemporary", in *Rewriting Dante*, 25). Hawkins and Jacoff regard the *Comedy* as a paradigm for contemporary poets to represent the crisis of a declining empire, as well as a text close to the intensely religious nature of American culture. Moreover, the personal story of the author Dante tells of a man who was able to turn his political and personal misfortunes into art, offering grounds for reflecting on justice and exile ("Introduction" to *The Poets' Dante*, xiii-xxvi).

<sup>5</sup> These translations are included in the *Inferno* edited by D. Halpern mentioned in Note no. 2.

the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> It was then that Dante, together with Ezra Pound and Eugenio Montale, helped to open the doors of poetry to Wright. Such an unusual jump-start into composing verse is a major component of Wright's very rich anecdotal memories.

As often recalled in his interviews,<sup>7</sup> it was 1959 and he was serving in the US Army Intelligence Corps in Verona, with no specific skills and little inclination for military discipline. One day he found himself reading Pound's 1911 poem "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula" standing in front of the place that had inspired it, at Sirmione on Lake Garda. There, on the spot, in front of a landscape more attractive than Paradise (to paraphrase the first line in Pound's lyric) he decided to pursue a life in poetry. This figure of a poet holding his poem while contemplating natural scenery was, we might say, Wright's first still image in a long series of self-portraits he was later to write on the thread of memory to follow the earthly journey of his autobiographical pilgrim-poet in search of a way towards some sort of revelation of the mystery that envelops each visible thing. Pound was indeed his "great highway into the Città Dante" (Wright 2001, 260), and that epiphanic moment set the ball rolling.<sup>8</sup>

Wright first studied Dante as a Fulbright student in Rome from 1963 to 1965,<sup>9</sup> reading *Inferno* while he was fully immersed in another important project: the translation of Montale's *La bufera e altro*. This book was to be published only much later, in 1978, with Gustave Doré's illustration of "la bufera infernal" from *Inf. V* reproduced on the cover.<sup>10</sup> The choice of this image is not accidental, because it was in the spring of 1978 that Wright read the complete *Comedy* in Italian in a systematic manner: one canto a day for three consecutive months, helping himself with the Singleton English edition and commentary and without writing one single line of his own (Wright 2001, 261).

<sup>6</sup> Wright, "Dantino Mio" in Hawkins and Jacoff 2001, 261.

<sup>7</sup> Details of this sudden conversion, when the landscape first entered his imagination, are related in several interviews collected in Wright's *Halflife* and *Quarter Notes*, and also inserted in poems.

<sup>8</sup> Wright has often acknowledged his debt to Pound for having introduced him to Dante at the onset of his career. Besides the much-quoted essay "Dantino Mio" (Wright 2001, 261), see also "Improvisations on Pound" in *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 33 (Fall 1985): 63–70. rpt. in Wright 1988, 10–19) and "Improvisations: *The Poem as Journey*" in Wright 1995, 35–36. Discussions of Pound's influence on his early work are to be read in many interviews, including the well-known 1989 *Paris Review* interview with poet and critic J.D. McClatchy ("The Art of Poetry XLI, Charles Wright," Winter II, 185–221, rpt. in Wright 1995, 89–121).

<sup>9</sup> In "Dantino Mio" (Wright 2001, 261), he credits his Fulbright literature professor, Maria Sampoli, for having introduced him to the study of Dante "I first studied Dante with Maria Sampoli [...]. I owe her both Dante and Montale, really two of the three great poetic influences of my life". The third was Pound.

<sup>10</sup> Montale, *The Storm & Other Poems*, translated by Charles Wright, Oberlin: Field Translation Series 1, 1978. For a study of Wright's translations from Montale see Francini 1992, 44–71. As with Dante, Wright has extensively discussed Montale's influence on his work in various occasions. See, for example, his interview "With Antonella Francini" (Wright 1988, 117–122) and the prose "A Matter of Emotional Transference," his contribution to a Montale conference held in Florence, Italy, in 1996 (rpt. in *Montale tradotto dai poeti*, 25–29).

Moreover, the 1970s was the decade when Wright's poetics of the "metaphysics of the quotidian" (Wright 1995, 95) firmly took on its peculiar features, revolving around three things, as the poet has often pointed out: language, landscape, and the idea of God.<sup>11</sup> His characteristic journey structure was also already present in the poetry of those years, as was the death theme—Wright's extreme metaphor for the unknown, set against the metaphor of light towards which all his poetry, in a Dante-like manner, is aiming. His common topography, too, was well-defined as a network of places and zones that in his writing continuously spans between the Northeast of Italy and the Southeastern United States, where he was born and grew up. Through these idealized, dynamic landscapes and shifting panels, charged with metaphysical possibilities and elusive epiphanies, his autobiographical pilgrim wanders and meditates. These are Wright's "sacred places" (Wright 1995, 97), the Stations of the Cross of a poet who, moving from his Christian background, has achieved a personal version of agnosticism.

In brief, Dante entered the poetics of an author who had already found his mature voice and looked at the Medieval poet as a guide along his contemporary spiritual pilgrimage, one that, unlike Dante's journey, was doomed to remain incomplete and unfulfilled. My sin, he writes, "has been to keep on nosing around, unlike Dante, in the unknown without a map [...], and without an entry point or exit" (Wright 2001, 260). And he first entered Wright's poetics visually, on the cover of his translation of *La bufera*, which he had read and translated from a religious and Dantean perspective. Montale, he writes, "is a religious poet of a unique sort": like Dante, he shifts "belief over to the real of the image, the simple message over into complex metaphor. By this shift in emphasis, language becomes religious, and 'God' becomes a possibility" (Wright 1988, 43 and 41). But Wright's God is a God he does not believe in. As J. D. McClatchy pointed out, Wright has given himself a formidable task: "to write about what isn't there in order to fall silent before it" (McClatchy, 106).<sup>12</sup>

No surprise, then, if the *cantica* Wright favors is the second. "A mountain in my poetry," he has conceded, "is that of Dante's Purgatory."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the book he published soon after his total immersion in the *Commedia*, *The Southern Cross* (1981), refers to *Purgatorio* right from the title, which recalls the "quattro stelle" in *Canto* 1, 23 while clearly alluding to the writer's Southern origin. The epigraph that opens the volume

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Wright 1995, 123: "There are three things, basically, that I write about – language, landscape and the idea of God. The idea of God seems to be the one thing that has floated up, naturally." This is a declaration that also often occurs in his recent poetry as he retrospectively examines the outcome of his original poetical plan.

<sup>12</sup> Studies on Wright's mysticism include Henry Hart's "Wright's *Via Mistica*" (Giannelli 1999, 325-344), and Bonnie Costello's "Charles Wright's 'Via Negativa': Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God" (2001). Costello remarks that Wright "has created a mysticism for the modern mind", and that his pilgrim persona "pursues disappearances, not presences; beauty is derived not from nature's generous plenitude, not from things or motions, but from the shadows which haunt it and the lights which penetrate it."

<sup>13</sup> Personal conversation with the poet.

comes from *Purg.* 21, 130-36, where Statius bows down in the attempt to embrace Virgil's feet "*trattando l'ombra come cosa calda.*" This episode allows Wright to further indicate his relationship to Dante. First, Statius' gesture coincides with his feelings towards the Medieval poet as well as the numerous masters to whom he genuflects and pays homage to in his poetry. Secondly, it offers a key to the reading of his entire work, which revolves around the presence-in-absence in the landscape of a transcendent reality which he stubbornly strives to reveal as a "*cosa calda.*" The first poem in *The Southern Cross* is a long "Homage to Paul Cézanne" in eight sections. In an oracular tone, Wright composes here a meditation on mortality. By imitating the technique of the French artist, who metonymically stands for all the great figures the American poet admires, he explores the relationship between nature and art, and between the living and the dead. In Section 3 he gives them a voice with words that echo Pia de' Tolomei's lines in *Purg.* 5:

The dead are constant in  
 The white lips of the sea.  
 Over and over, through clenched teeth, they tell  
 Their story, the story each knows by heart:  
*Remember me, speak my name*  
*When the moon tugs at my sleeve,*  
*When the body of water is raised and becomes the body of light,*  
*Remember me, speak my name.*<sup>14</sup>

Thirdly, Dante's work is for Wright an immense reservoir of language, a dictionary from which he freely draws images and situations, adjusting them to his poetical discourse, "I go to Dante as I go to a dictionary," he has written, "to find out what something means". And since he has set for himself the arduous goal of grasping the unsayable, following the Florentine poet's example he has tried "to raise [himself] from [his] own ground, into [his] own blue" (Wright 2001, 263 and 260). These words are Wright's declaration of humility towards "the great poet of light" (Wright 1988, 22); at the same time, they trace his choice of a specific aesthetic path, shoring up his lines with the work of selected kindred spirits. "*Da me stesso non vegno,*" says Dante to Cavalcante in *Inf.* 10. Likewise, Wright needs guiding figures along his journey – from Dante to St. Augustine, the Christian mystics, the Medieval Chinese poets, composers of country music, and authors belonging to various cultural traditions. Besides the predictable names of Pound and Montale, his poetical genealogy includes Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, Dino Campana, Kafka, Leopardi, Hopkins, Giorgio Morandi, Rothko, etc.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from Wright's poetry come from *Oblivion Banjo* (Wright 2019).

<sup>15</sup> In the interview "With Antonella Francini," which focuses on Montale, Wright also discusses, in general terms, his relationship with other Italian authors, including Dino Campana, whose *Orphic Songs* he translated and published in 1984 (Wright 1988, 122-125). Campana's prose poem "La Verna," with its many references to Dante (especially to *Purgatorio*) and the figure of the pilgrim poet as "novo peregrin d'amore," elicits an almost too obvious comparison. In the interview, Wright talks of the affinity he feels

Inserting quotations in his original verses is a characteristic feature of the mode of composing of Wright who, writes Helen Vendler, “turns to the abiding memory of his predecessors in contemplation,” to compose “an aesthetic pantheon,” and assert the function and survival of art” (Vendler 1988, 14). In his essay on Wright’s Dantism, Massimo Natale has pointed out that the *Commedia* is a book of formation for the American poet, “un breviario in versi che mette a disposizione un’intera e salda possibilità di interpretazione del mondo” (Natale 2020, 135). It is a manual to consult, we might add, to better bring into focus his poetics.

What are, then, the moments in the second *cantica* that Wright singles out? The key concept of *Purgatorio* as a place of passage, close to human experience, certainly coincides with Wright’s metaphysics. Yet, within this framework he often references *Purg. 10* and the meeting with the penitent prideful, coupling this sin with its opposite: humbleness. In “Mount Caribou at Night,” at the beginning of *The Southern Cross*, the mountain mentioned in the title (which is actually located in northwest Montana, Wright’s vacation retreat) looms up for the first time in Wright’s poetry as a metaphor for an imaginary afterlife which his voice seems to come from—“the other side of the river,” to use one of Wright’s many expressions for his fictitious afterworld.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Harold Bloom has remarked that Wright “has the unique art of bringing up from their graves the mighty dead among the poets and performing this resurrection without self-consciousness. It is as though he knows he already is among his spiritual ancestors” (Bloom 2011, 331). However, no mighty dead are brought up from the graves in “Mount Caribou at Night,” but instead early Montana homesteaders in the Yaak River area. According to legend, the settler Walter Smoot was buried in a sitting position, his head bent toward his knees. The image recalls the penitents on the Terrace of Pride bent under the weight of rocks at the end of *Purg. 10*, and alludes to the carvings depicting examples of humility Dante sees engraved in the slope (“l’imagini di tanti umilitadi”). Immortal, in the background, the majestic Mt. Caribou rises to the sky where the constellations of Cassiopeia, Andromeda, and the Whale are on the move—a sharp contrast with human mortality in the small cemetery where the poet stands:

Just north of the Yaak River, one man sits bolt upright,  
 A little bonnet of dirt and bunch grass above his head:  
 [...]
 I speak to the others here, lodged in their stone wedges, the blocks

---

with this “unique sort of pilgrim”: “Most of my own work has centered around pilgrimages of one sort or another, and I feel a kinship. There is little about his ‘lyrics’ per se that attracts me, and I find there is little to learn from him technically for me at this point. But his spirit has always moved me [.... It was his desperate reaching and yearning for what he felt but couldn’t ever write down or understand truly that has always drawn me to him.” On the same subject see, for example, “Charles Wright on Eugenio Montale and Dino Campana: An Interview with Mary Zeppa” (Wright 2008, 29-36).

<sup>16</sup> *The Other Side of the River* is the title of another major book of Wright’s, published in 1984.

And slashes that vein the ground, and tell them that Walter Smoot,  
 Starched and ease in his bony duds  
 Under the tamaracks, still holds the nightfall between his knees.

Work stars, drop by inveterate drop, begin  
 Cassiopeia's sails and electric paste  
 Across the sky.

Wright's recurrent projection of his pilgrim-persona into an otherworldly future is frequently modelled on the *Commedia's* second book, often alluding to purging scenes. This happens in "Hawaii Dantesca," where the reference is to *Purg. 1*, to the purification rite with the reed of humility, and to *Purg. 2* for the image of the white wings of the "celestial nocchiero" ("I primi bianchi apparver ali"):

Soon it will be time for the long walk under the earth toward the sea.  
 [...]
   
 I hope the one with the white wings will come.  
 I hope the island of reeds is as far away as I think it is.

When I get there, I hope they forgive me if the knot I tie is the wrong knot.

In a Hawaiian landscape, the poet prefigures the moment of passing when his entire earthly life will be assembled in one single image on the day of reckoning—not a Last Judgement, but possibly the judgment of posterity on his poetry. "I don't see myself as any kind of spiritual creature at all," he said in an interview, "what I am trying to do is writing a kind of quasi-spiritual autobiography" (Suarez, Verner 1999, 68). The adverb *quasi* is here perhaps the most relevant word since Wright's poetical project does not lead to paradisiacal transcendence; rather, it resounds like a prayer in praise of his idealized landscapes and constellations. The poet, in a pantheistic sense, imagines being transfigured or 'transubstantiated,' to use his religious term, into these landscapes after death, returning to his ideal country: the numinous world of nature. Wright's pilgrim is the priest of this world, one who urges language to constantly reformulate his chant, and so to move beyond meaning itself into musical tones. Like Orpheus, the mythical poet with whom he finally identifies, he asks his poetry to enact over and over the fatal moment of the backward look, to be able to sing his song of irreversible loss: "You have got to find Eurydice on your own / you have got / To find the small crack / between here and everywhere else all by yourself."<sup>17</sup>

In "Reply to Lapo Gianni", a 1975 free re-writing of the renowned sonnet attributed to Dante, "Guido, I' vorrei che tu e Lapo e io . . .," already at this early stage in his work, Wright introduces a major theme in his poetical fiction, affirming that the human

<sup>17</sup> This quotation comes from the poem "No Direction Home," included in Wright's 2009 book *Sestets*. (Rpt. in Wright 2019, 691). For a discussion of the Orpheus figure in his later poetry, see Francini 2003.

experience is doomed to remain within its earthly confinements: “Lapo, we are all slow orphans under the cruel sleep of heaven...” (Wright 2019, 85). In a later poem of 2000, “Step-Children of Paradise,” he compares humans to “unconstellated stars, just next to / Great form and great structure, ungathered, uncalled upon” (Wright 2019, 455).

But there is also an extra-textual aspect to bring to light in Wright’s relationship with the *Commedia*. Being a poet who has always been interested in formal completeness and in the construction of internal patterns in his books and poems, Wright adopts Dante’s three *cantiche* as a model, or rather “a scaffolding” (Eaton, 130), to gather retrospectively ample selections from the volumes published in the last thirty years of the past century. However, his *trilogy of trilogies*, as he has called this grandiose project, appears eccentric, since each volume includes not only the poems from the three main books of each decade but also new compositions, thus constructing bridges between different phases of his writing.<sup>18</sup> The third of this asymmetric trio, *Negative Blue* (2000), gathers the major volumes of the 1990s, *Chichamauga*, *Black Zodiac* and *Appalachia*. In an interview Wright says that this triptych, at least in the poet’s intentions, was to reflect the Dantean scheme:

*Appalachia* was not only the last book in the last trilogy, but it was also the last book of all three of the trilogies. I felt I should write a kind of Paradiso, or half-way house at least. The trouble was that everything the trilogies talked about refuted the idea, much less the actuality of a Paradiso. Besides, I wasn’t really capable [...] [*Black Zodiac* is] the purgatorial book of the last trilogy [...] *Chickamauga* is an odd little inferno, really never getting past the anteroom of limbo, hellish enough for some people. It’s a doorway, not a tunnel, to *Black Zodiac*, which suffers the purgatorial clear-out of all confessions-self-torture, self-mutation. Death-haunted, perhaps, but a way-station on the trail to a ghostlier X, a deadlier zone” (Caseley 2000, 22-25).

Aware of the purgatorial destination of his contemporary pilgrimage, it is in *Black Zodiac* that Wright abandons the Dantean structural model and begins to compose his alternative end of the journey, *The Appalachian Book of the Dead* series, six poems modelled after *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Set in his native Appalachia region, these poems are his secular version of ancient texts which are, respectively, guides to assist the dead person in the interim time between earthly life and the following rebirth, and in the journey towards the afterlife. The “ghostlier X” is indeed “a deadlier zone,” imaginatively unreachable for the non-believer Wright. In the third poem of the series, Dante’s vision of *Par. 18* is in fact deflated to an everyday beautiful night scene. The letter “emme” that Dante sees taking shape on Jupiter is here just the initial letter of the word *moon*, “a small-time paradiso...”:

<sup>18</sup> The first trilogy, *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (1982), also includes a few poems from his ‘apprentice’ book, *The Grave of the Right Hand* (1970); the new poems in the other trilogies are usually collected under the title “Coda,” and they have often been previously printed by Fine Press limited editions.







There are many other moments in Wright's poetry that refer to, or recall, other works of Dante besides the *Commedia* and *Purgatorio*, as we have seen. From *Rime*, for instance, he borrows the famous line of the sestina "*Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra*" to insert it in another long poem, "Lives of the Saints," for describing the 'darkness' of knowledge within one of his usual seasonal cycles:

*Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra* –  
A little light and a great darkness,  
Darkness wherein our friends are hid  
and our love's gone wrong....

As Dante is "a dictionary" for Wright, his borrowings are often ready-made images useful to compose his lyrical tableaux. In the final section of "Yard Journal," a bumblebee is compared to the monster Geryon in *Inf. 17* as the poet imagines being transported on the insect's shoulders into his own version of the afterlife. In the last line of the poem, he echoes Dante's words to Brunetto Latini in *Inf. 15* – "Bico, my man, are you here?" – as he envisions faces of dead people "starting to swim up" and calls out the name of a friend who has passed away. Likewise, in "Laguna Dantesca," Wright borrows the image of the "piccioleta barca" in *Par. 2* and the episode of Piccarda Donati in *Par. 3* to formulate his wish to return to the natural world (Wright 2019, 110-11).<sup>25</sup> Also, throughout his poetry, the poet's persona often casts his own contemporary dismay, or search for a road map towards some kind of truth, within the framework of the *Comedy's* initial lines.<sup>26</sup>

But it is in the six books written after 2000 that Dante's word appears more than ever a special dictionary available to Wright to fathom meanings that are beyond language. "Thinking about him and his poem has made me medieval-minded aesthetically," he writes in his Dante essay (Wright 2001, 264). This is how he portrays himself in "North American Bear," a 1999 poem dedicated to the constellation of the Big Dipper, thus updating his long series of self-portraits: "There is a final solitude I haven't arrived at yet, [...] / I simmer inside its outline [...] / Like some medieval journeyman enfrescoed with his poem in his hand."<sup>27</sup> One of his *adagia* reads: "I would like my poems to be like visionary frescoes on the walls of some-out-of-the-way monastery;" and another: "I write from the point of view of a monk in his cell. Sometimes I look at the stones, sometimes I look out of the windows" (Wright 1995, 81 and 80). As if already exited from life, Wright

<sup>25</sup> For a reading of this poem, see Natale 2020, 143-44.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua" I: "Every important act is wordless—/ to slip from the right way, / To fail, still accomplishes something" (Wright 2019, 356).

<sup>27</sup> Wright may have had in mind Domenico di Michelino's 1465 famous painting in the Florence Cathedral showing Dante with the *Divine Comedy* in his hand, opened at the very beginning, and surrounded by illustrations of the three regions in the Christian afterlife.







down gravity to humor. Here, as is often the case in Wright's poetry, his "nosing around" in the unknown "without a map," unlike Dante, is tinged with facetious, conversational remarks. In contrast to the *Comedy's* grand structure, he calls the fictitious place where his persona performs his journey between life and death, under "the shadow of Dante's great wings" "Dabblesville", albeit "serious Dabblesville," (Wright 2001, 260). In his later poetry, this masterful *dilettante* on metaphysics thus looks backward to his own monumental body of work, "hoping to catch the right train, hoping to find the right city" (Wright 2001, 263).

In the end, Wright's spiritual search and constant reminding us of the limits of human nature contrast strongly with our current forms of self-importance empowered by social media, materialistic values, and cult of the body, thus making his poetry today, decades after it was written, a sort of apostrophe to a prideful and blind age, which echoes Dante's words in *Purg. 10* to the "superbi cristian [ ... ], de la vista de la mente infermi."

## REFERENCES

- ANDREWS, T. (ed.). 1995. *The Point Where all Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright*. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press.
- BLOOM, H. 2011. "Whitman's Prodigals: Ashbery, Ammons, Merwin, Strand, Charles Wright." In Id. *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*, 294-333. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- BOITANI, P. 2007. *Letteratura europea e medioevo volgare*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- CAMPANA, D. 1984. *Orphic Songs*. Translated by Charles Wright. Oberlin: Field Translation Series 9.
- EATON, A. 2019. "Reading the Bones: An Interview with Charles Wright." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 95/4: 130-135.
- CARRERA, A. 1999. "Charles Wright: *To Giacomo Leopardi in the Sky / A Giacomo Leopardi in Cielo*." In *Giacomo Leopardi: poeta e filosofo: Atti del Convegno dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 31 marzo/1 aprile 1988*, 14-24. Firenze: Cadmo Edizioni
- CASELEY, M. 2000. "Through Purgatory to Appalachia: An Interview with Charles Wright." *PN Review* 27/1 (Sept-Oct.): 22-25.
- COSTELLO, B. 2001. "Charles Wright's 'Via Negativa': Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God." *Contemporary Literature* 42/2: 325-346.
- DENHAM, R.D. 2008. *Charles Wright: A Companion to the Late Poetry, 1988-2007*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- . 2009. *The Early Poetry of Charles Wright: A Companion, 1960-1990*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- . 2015. *A Charles Wright Bibliography*. Compiled by R. Denham. Emory, Virginia: Iron Mountain Press.
- FRANCONI, A. 1992. "A Poet's Workshop: Charles Wright Translating Eugenio Montale." In *L'anello che non tiene: Journal of Modern Italian Literature* 4/1-2: 44-71.
- . 2001. "Trilogia tripla: riflessioni sulla poesia di Charles Wright," in *Crepuscolo americano e altre poesie (1980-2000)*. An anthology of Wright's poetry edited and translated by A. Francini, 261-281. Milano: Jaca Book.
- . 2003. "'The pale Hems of the Masters' Gown': Mediterranean Voices and Shadows in the Poetry of Charles Wright." In M. Bacigalupo e P. Castagnero (eds.) *America and the Mediterranean*, 85-92. Torino: Otto Editore.
- . 2007. "Introduction" in *Rewriting Dante / Le riscritture di Dante. Russia, Usa, Italia. 2007. Semicerchio. Rivista di poesia comparata xxxvi/1*, ed. by M. Bossi, A. Francini, F. Stella e L. Tonini, 5-10. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- . 2021 (2006). "Premessa" to *Breve storia dell'ombra*. An anthology of Wright's poetry, edited and translated by A. Francini, 9-27. Milano: Crocetti Editore.
- GEWANTER, D. 2007. "Dante 2006: The Contemporary." In *Rewriting Dante / Le riscritture di Dante. Russia, Usa, Italia. 2007. Semicerchio. Rivista di poesia comparata xxxvi/1*, edited by M. Bossi, A. Francini, F. Stella e L. Tonini, 3-87. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- GIANNELLI, A. (ed.) 1999. *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press.
- HART, H. 2004. "Charles Wright's *Via Mistica*." *Georgia Review* 58/2: 409-432 (Rpt. In Giannelli (ed.) 1999, 325-344)
- HAWKINS S. P., JACOFF, R. (eds.) 2001. "Introduction" in *The Poets's Dante*. xiii-xxvi. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- JACOFF, R. 2011. "Reclaiming *Paradiso*: Dante in the Poetry of James Merrill and Charles Wright." In M. Gragnolati, F. Camilletti and F. Lampart (eds.). *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 123-136. Vienna: Turia + Kant.
- MCCLATCHY, J.D. 1995 (1989). "Under the Sign of the Cross." In T. Andrews (ed.). *The Point Where all Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright*, 72-85. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press (Rpt. in Giannelli 1999, 142-153).
- . 2006 [1999]. "Ars Longa." In A. Giannelli (ed.). *High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright*, 101-110. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press.
- MOFFETT, J. 2009. *Understanding Charles Wright*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- . 2011. "A Coin for a Closed Eye: Pound's Influence on Wright's 'Appalachian Book of the Dead'." *Southern Literary Journal* 44/1: 56-73.
- MONTALE, E. 1978. *The Storm & Other Poems*. Trans. by Charles Wright. Oberlin: Field Translation Series 1.
- NATALE, M. 2020. "'The Last Chronicler of the Twilight': con Charles Wright e Dante a Caribou." *Italianistica. Rivista di Letteratura Italiana* XLIX/2, maggio-agosto: 131-153.
- PINSKY, R. 2007. "Tavola rotonda su Traduzione e riscrittura di Dante." In *Rewriting Dante / Le riscritture di Dante. Russia, Usa, Italia*. 2007. *Semicerchio. Rivista di poesia comparata* xxxvi/1, ed. by M. Bossi, A. Francini, F. Stella e L. Tonini, 3-87. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- SUAREZ, E., VERNER, A. 1999. "An Interview by Ernest Suarez and Amy Verner". In R.D. Denham (ed.). *Charles Wright in Conversations: Interviews 1972-2006*, 65-82. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- VENDLER, H. 1979. "The Transcendent 'I'." *New Yorker*, 29 October, 160-74. (Rpt. in *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1980; and in Giannelli 1999, 115-125).
- . 1988. "Charles Wright." In H. Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*, 388-397. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Rpt. in Andrews 1995, 13-20).
- . 1995. "The Nothing That Is." Review of *Chickamauga*. *New Republic* 7 August, 42-45. (Rpt. in Giannelli 1999, 68-75).
- WRIGHT, C. 1988. *Half-life: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- . 1995. *Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- . 1997. "A Matter of Emotional Transference." in *Montale tradotto dai poeti*. Conference proceedings collected in *Semicerchio. Rivista di poesia comparata* XVI-XVII, 1/2, ed. by A. Francini, 25-29. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- . 2001. "Dantino Mio." In *The Poets's Dante*. xiii-xxvi. Edited by P. S. Hawkins and R. Jacoff. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- . 2008. *Charles Wright in Conversation: Interviews, 1979-2006*. Edited by R. D. Denham. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company Publishers.
- . 2019. *Oblivion Banjo*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

ERMINIA ARDISSINO

## JOHN KINSELLA

*Una poesia dantesca in chiave ecologica*

**ABSTRACT:** Among the many re-uses of Dante's *Comedy* in contemporary artistic expressions (movies, music, novels, poetry) the essay presents John Kinsella's trilogy, *Divine Comedy. Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (2008), *On the Outskirts* (2017), and *Musical Dante* (2021). Here Dante's poem inspires an ecological poetry in defense of the multiplicity of life on our planet. The paper discusses why Dante inspires such a poetic discourse on one of the most topical and urgent problems. Presenting the similarities and differences between Dante's and Kinsella's poetry, evident in the structures and in the concept of Nature, it eventually indicates their profound affinity in the ethical sphere and regarding the focus on small territories as case studies for the entire world.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, John Kinsella, Poetry, Ecology, Ethics.

Nel convegno organizzato nel 2000 dalla Società Pio Rajna per inaugurare una nuova stagione di studi danteschi, il poeta Mario Luzi, che alla poesia di Dante aveva dedicato diversi studi, definì con lucidità la peculiarità del poema di Dante: una poesia destinata a essere declinata in molti modi, combinandosi con gli interessi del lettore, di ogni lettore, e creando con essi nuove possibilità per il discorso umano. Affermava Luzi:

La *Commedia* non è opera che si appaghi della riuscita del suo aver detto. ... è tra le opere d'arte più "seguite" e nello stesso tempo un'opera da fare, voglio dire proposta al continuo rifacimento dell'uomo e alla sua inesauribile perfettibilità. Questo è probabilmente, *en abîme*, lo spirito motore dell'organismo poetico e delle sue particolarità. Possiamo, dicevo, e forse dobbiamo dare a quello spirito molti nomi, prima di averne trovato uno solo, che sia il giusto. (2001, 728)

Nulla di più vero. Si sono potuti vedere nel corso dei secoli, e ancor più di recente, dei modi davvero inconsueti di far interagire la poesia del Nostro con urgenze contingenti, storicamente anche ben definite e persino lontanissime dagli interessi di Dante o anche solo dal suo raggio di pensiero.

Lasciando stare il passato, dove il poema è servito per fini religiosi e anti-ecclesiastici, nazionali e universali, educativi e di protesta, focalizziamo la nostra attenzione sulla contemporaneità, in cui si è combinata la poesia di Dante con istanze diversissime, eppure sempre pertinenti oltre che mai scontate. In aggiunta ai numerosissimi poeti, italiani e non, che da sempre, ma in particolare dall'età romantica, hanno attinto a Dante parole, stilemi, motivi e ispirazione, ci sono musicisti, artisti, registi che hanno impiegato la poesia di Dante anche in altre forme d'arte.

Nel film *La doppia vita di Veronica* (questo il titolo in italiano), del 1991, il regista polacco Krzysztof Kieslowski fa delle tre terzine iniziali del secondo canto del *Paradiso* le protagoniste della scena centrale, cantate dalla splendida Irène Jacob, che impersona la prima protagonista, Weronika.<sup>1</sup> Per il film di Kieslowski esse entrano in gioco, musicate dal bravissimo Zbigniew Preisner, compositore che ha accompagnato tutti i film di Kieslowski dal 1984, per sottolineare la finzione delle guide, così importanti per il film, che tratta del destino e del rispecchiamento esistenziale, come per la *Commedia*.<sup>2</sup> La costruzione dell'intero film si basa sulla capacità di supplire con l'immaginazione al reale ed evidenzia l'importanza delle presenze (anche immaginarie) che nella vita rimediano alla solitudine esistenziale e indicano delle direzioni.

Non di guide per la vita, ma sul viaggio della vita è costruita l'opera *blues* del compositore newyorkese Carmaan Moore, *Don and Bea in Love* del 2018, una riscrittura musicale del viaggio nelle sfere celesti di Dante e Beatrice. Il poema di Dante si mostra ispiratore delle musiche e dei canti, e soprattutto della ricerca umana che ha nella musica il suo veicolo comunicativo. Per Moore si tratta della indispensabilità dell'amore in un cammino verso la piena realizzazione nella bellezza e nell'armonia cui inevitabilmente l'essere umano aspira.<sup>3</sup>

E ancora: il romanziere giapponese Kenzaburo Oe, premio Nobel per la letteratura nel 1994, ha pubblicato nel 1987 un romanzo autobiografico organizzato tutto sulla poesia di Dante, in particolare sulla seconda cantica, il *Purgatorio*, che ispira l'azione dei due giovani protagonisti e la loro ricerca dei valori della vita e dell'oltre-mondo in un tradizionale villaggio del centro rurale del Giappone negli anni Cinquanta. Il focus de *Gli anni della nostalgia* (questo il titolo italiano) sono le drammatiche vicende del protagonista Kei a seguito della nascita di un figlio con handicap.<sup>4</sup> L'amico Gii, personalità carismatica, capace di influenzare profondamente l'altro più giovane protagonista, è nel romanzo il portatore di un messaggio di responsabilità che trova nella poesia di Dante, conosciuta grazie agli studi universitari nella traduzione di Heisaburo Yamakawa, elementi per riorientare la vita.<sup>5</sup> Infatti il suo appoggio fa maturare l'amico sulle sue responsabilità di padre, che infine accetterà la paternità, in una riscoperta progressiva che ha nei versi iniziali e conclusivi della seconda cantica il suo *leit-motif* ("Per correr migliori acque alza le vele" e "rifatto sì come piante novelle / rinovellate di novella

<sup>1</sup> Si tratta dei versi 1-9: "O voi che siete in piccioletta barca, / desiderosi d'ascoltar seguiti / dietro al mio legno che cantando varca: / tornate a riveder li vostri liti: / non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse / perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti. / L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse; / Minerva spira e conducemi Apollo, / e nove muse mi dimostrar l'orse ..." (*Par. II*, 1-9).

<sup>2</sup> La fantasia sui versi di Dante per voce solista, coro e orchestra della colonna sonora viene definita *Concerto in mi minore*. La musica è attribuita, come la colonna sonora del film, a due scritture, del 1798 e del 1802, di un fittizio musicista, vissuto tra '700 e '800, Van den Budenmayer, un doppio che il musicista Preisner si è dato. Cfr. Murri 1996, 121-8.

<sup>3</sup> Sul compositore, oltre il suo sito web (<https://www.carmanmoore.com/>), offre importanti informazioni la sua autobiografia (Moore 2011), anche se precedente l'opera dantesca.

<sup>4</sup> Il titolo tradotto è assai fedele all'originale, che letteralmente sarebbe traducibile come *Lettera per gli anni della nostalgia*.

<sup>5</sup> Sulla conoscenza di Dante da parte di Oe si veda Ardisino e Rizzardi 2022.

fronda”, *Purg.* I, 1 e XXXIII, 143-4), che veicola poeticamente e visivamente l’idea di rinnovamento dopo l’errore.<sup>6</sup>

E ancora, recentemente il MOMA di New York, per chiudere nel 2017 la retrospettiva su Robert Rauschenberg, l’artista newyorkese che negli anni Sessanta aveva illustrato l’*Inferno* con immagini che hanno fatto storia, ha organizzato un evento cui ha dato il titolo *Dante among Friends*, emblematico del peso che ha il nostro poeta nell’immaginario anche artistico. La serata è stata animata dalla lettura di due giovani ma affermati poeti americani, Robin Coste Lewis e Kevin Young, cui era stato chiesto di scrivere componimenti, tenendo presenti sia Dante sia le illustrazioni di Rauschenberg.<sup>7</sup> Se già l’artista aveva illustrato l’*Inferno* con immagini della contemporaneità, i due giovani poeti hanno trattato nei loro versi (17 componimenti ciascuno, i primi 14 di Young, i successivi 14 di Lewis, quindi 3 ciascuno dei rimanenti) anche del presente, muovendosi tra le immagini di Rauschenberg, la loro fonte e la propria esperienza.

Ma forse il dialogo più sorprendente instaurato dalla poesia di Dante con la contemporaneità è quello attuato dal poeta australiano John Kinsella, che ha coniugato il poema con il suo impegno di attivista ecologico per la difesa del pianeta. Kinsella ha al suo attivo molte raccolte di poesie, è molto conosciuto e apprezzato soprattutto nel mondo anglosassone, è stato tradotto anche in Italiano, ed è stato docente di *poetry* all’università di Cambridge, oltre che in altre università.<sup>8</sup> Nel 2008 ha pubblicato *Divine Comedy. Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, una raccolta poetica ispirata (fin dal titolo) dal poema di Dante e avente come oggetto la denuncia contro l’abuso del territorio australiano. L’opera è stata scritta in epoca ancora non sospetta, prima degli incendi del 2019, mostrando quindi come Kinsella abbia rivestito il ruolo (purtroppo) di ‘poeta vate’, pronunciandosi contro gli stravolgimenti che, determinati dall’economia, distruggono il territorio, cancellando specie animali e vegetali. Dante è la sua ispirazione, Dante il suo interlocutore poetico, Dante la sua forza. Su questa sua poesia vorrei focalizzare la mia attenzione, evidenziando la potenzialità della poesia di Dante declinata in versione ecologista da Kinsella.

*Divine Comedy. Journeys Through a Regional Geography* è organizzato come un viaggio, al pari del viaggio di Dante, che si svolge però sul territorio australiano, partendo dalla regione occidentale dell’Australia, nella zona più familiare al poeta, il giardino della casa della madre ai piedi del monte Walwalinj (o Bakewell), che rappresenta un luogo affine al purgatorio dantesco. Passa poi a considerare l’arcadia australiana, la campagna

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Ardissino e Rizzardi 2022.

<sup>7</sup> L’evento si è svolto il 12 settembre 2017. La pubblicazione relativa con le poesie: *Robert Rauschenberg. Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno* 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Sulla poesia di John Kinsella, in particolare sulla sua versione ecologica, si possono vedere tra i più recenti saggi: Alizadeh 2010, Reed 2010, Bristow 2013 e 2015, Moore e Bristow 2014; Maling 2021, Ryan 2021. Si veda inoltre Birns e Hughes-D’Aeth 2021, ovvero il numero monografico della rivista “Angelaki” 2021, 26/2, con i saggi di Mead, Philip, *Beyond the Bounds: John Kinsella’s Poetics of International Regionalism*, pp. 10-15; Vickery, Ann, *Art and Acts of Seeing in the Work of John Kinsella*, pp. 16-31; Hughes-D’aeth, Tony, *A Cybernetic Wheatbelt: John Kinsella’s ‘Divine Comedy’*, pp. 43-54; He, Yanli, *John Kinsella. International Regionalism, and World Literature*, pp. 81-91; McCooley, David. 2021. *John Kinsella as Life Writer: the Poetics of Dirt*, pp. 92-103.

intorno, nella parte che corrisponde al paradiso, e si conclude infine nella periferia di Perth, segnata pesantemente dalla speculazione edilizia, quindi in corrispondenza all'inferno. Suddiviso dunque nelle tre parti canoniche del mondo dell'aldilà, che scandiscono la suddivisione nelle tre cantiche, il viaggio si presenta come una parodia del poema, anzitutto per la natura terrena del viaggio, precisato anche con le definizioni che compaiono nei sottotitoli di ciascuna delle parti e che oserei indicare come ossimoriche: *Purgatorio: Up Close; Paradiso: Rupture; Inferno: Leisure Centre*, che subito distanziano queste trasposizioni della *Divine Comedy* dalle tre cantiche della *Commedia*.<sup>9</sup> Ogni parte ha poi ancora un sottotitolo *A Distraction on Dante's Second [o Third o First] Canticle of the "Divine Comedy"*, definendo quindi la scrittura come deviazione, allontanamento, attrazione per qualcos'altro, dopo un'adesione. Si tratta infatti qui di una devianza rispetto a Dante, devianza di contenuto e di forma, necessaria per una nuova creazione. Non un tradimento e neppure noncuranza verso l'archi-testo, ma la necessaria autonomia per creare.

Ma se questi aspetti distanziano le due opere, altri le avvicinano: anche le tre cantiche di Kinsella sono suddivise in canti, composti da terzine. Non si tratta della terza rima, ma di terzine che riprendono il modello dantesco, di cui si riportano talvolta anche dei versi a inizio dei componimenti.<sup>10</sup> Il poeta stesso ha dichiarato in una videoconferenza la qualità del suo rapporto con il suo ipotesto, rivelando che la poesia di Dante gli suggerisce anzitutto stati d'animo che sono impiegati per dire le nuove angosce ecologiche: la nostalgia di una foresta perduta è come la nostalgia di Francesca per il "tempo felice / ne la miseria" (*Inf. V*, 122-3).<sup>11</sup> Anche qui c'è una figura femminile, Tracy, che è insieme Virgilio e Beatrice, comunque una guida che lo attira verso l'alto.<sup>12</sup> Se Beatrice è paradisiaca, idealizzata, amata incondizionatamente, ossessione per Dante, ma anche profondamente umana, Tracy è soprattutto terrena, ha orizzonti umani, è impegnata nella vita di tutti i giorni. Infine è indicata come altra guida (un altro Virgilio?) il grande jazzista Louis Armstrong, che con il suo jazz "relieves the paranoia. He's there in Hell, guiding us out" (Kinsella 2008, 271).

C'è poi la realtà locale, che agisce come la Firenze del poema dantesco, luogo emblema dei mali del mondo. Il luogo specifico che fa da sfondo alla poesia di Kinsella, a cui si riferiscono gli eventi, i dialoghi, le osservazioni è la Wheatbelt del Nord-Ovest

<sup>9</sup> In italiano i sottotitoli sono così tradotti da Maria Cristina Biggio: *Purgatorio: Ravvicinato; Paradiso: Scissione; Inferno: Centro ricreativo* (Kinsella 2014).

<sup>10</sup> A proposito del metro scelto così Kinsella nota: "All [the cantos] in the 'traditional' three-line stanzas, though I have not specifically used Terza Rima" (Kinsella 2008, 6).

<sup>11</sup> La videoconferenza è fruibile su <https://www.unito.it/eventi/dal-paradiso-di-dante-allinferno-ecologico-diretta-streaming-su-unito-media>; la traduzione, sempre a cura di Maria Cristina Biggio, è pubblicata in Ardisino, Cuozzo 2022, 17-29.

<sup>12</sup> La sua guida, scrive il poeta, "is textual as much as real". "Beatrice is no virtual figure for me, and my partner Tracy (also a poet) lures me on upwards, though she is not divine – she's in the muck of the walk as much as being at the end of it. She's Virgil and a Beatrice rolled into one" (Kinsella 2008, 5). A pagina 273 rivela che si tratta di Tracy Ryan, autrice di diverse opere di poesia e narrativa, e moglie del poeta.

australiano, con ovvii addentellati alla realtà del pianeta.<sup>13</sup> Il luogo è dunque circoscritto, sebbene talvolta venga ampliato ad includere spazi prossimi, come avviene specialmente nelle sezioni paradisiaca e infernale. Ma non si perde mai di vista la focalizzazione su una porzione minima di territorio, ben osservabile, perché ben conosciuta, molto familiare. Scrive il poeta a proposito: “A further exploration and collapsing of the macro and the micro. [...] In essence, the text remains firmly grounded on earth (or from the earth up and out), in Western Australia wheatbelt. Other places, other travelings, are drawn to *its* centre”.<sup>14</sup> L’effetto è per dichiarazione stessa dell’autore, di avvicinarsi ancor più al suo territorio: “Rather than travel upwards, he travels sideways, and maybe gets closer to home in doing so” (*ibidem*). Obiettivo dichiarato fin dall’apertura dunque è quello di occuparsi di una piccola porzione di terra in un certo periodo di tempo come un campione di realtà che proietta i problemi del pianeta intero, come era la Firenze di Dante: una città, non un mondo, ma una realtà in cui ci riconosciamo ancora oggi, e che rappresenta il mondo intero, l’umanità, come succede in ogni vera poesia.

In questo mondo circoscritto hanno un ruolo importante gli aborigeni, i *Ballardong Nyungar people*, un riferimento costante per Kinsella, sia che nomini i luoghi (allora due nomi sono d’obbligo, quello indigeno e quello dato dai colonizzatori—British Ensign Dale—nella prima metà dell’Ottocento), sia che ne ricordi i miti e le leggende (Kinsella 2008, 162). Ma i nativi rappresentano anche il popolo sottomesso di questo territorio, visto come paradiso perduto per colpa appunto dei colonizzatori. Presentando la sua sezione sul paradiso, Kinsella dice chiaramente che suo intento è di celebrare quello che rimane: “In a damage land you celebrate what has *not* been lost, and acknowledge what has”.<sup>15</sup> Quindi attribuisce la perdita proprio alla colonizzazione: “In a land stolen from others – as the land I come from has been stolen from the Ballardong Nyungar people – you acknowledge that theft and look to heal and recompense this loss”.<sup>16</sup> Non solo, ma egli denuncia il massacro degli aborigeni e le prevaricazioni per opera di quel colono, Robert Dale, che per primo raggiunse questa terra e “who took the head of the murdered Aboriginal warrior, Yagan, back to Britain for the horrific disrespect and degradation of society rounds of ‘show and tell’” (Kinsella 2008, 269).

La grande differenza dal viaggio dantesco è che i *journeys* di Kinsella sono in effetti viaggi al plurale, non sono ‘il’ viaggio verso la terra promessa, quello della libertà da ogni vincolo e schiavitù terrena, quello allegoricamente presentato attraverso l’Esodo, il vero

<sup>13</sup> Kinsella scrive che la sua realtà corrisponde alla Firenze del poema: “The city is Perth, Western Australia. That’s the conflicted and mentally (spiritually, physically) destroyed Florence” (Kinsella 2008, 268).

<sup>14</sup> In particolare dà spazio alla leggenda del monte di cui si occupa nella raccolta, il Walwalinj, per i nativi “the hill that cries” (Kinsella, 2008, 4), deriverebbe dalla metamorfosi di un giovane guerriero di una tribù che fuggì con una giovane di un’altra tribù, sebbene sconsigliato dagli anziani, per cui fu trasformato in monte, lui nel Walwalinj, lei nel vicino Wongborel (per i colonizzatori Mount Brown), divisi dal fiume Avon che scorre nel mezzo. I due giovani non potranno vedersi fin che le montagne non si uniranno. (Ivi, 4-5).

<sup>15</sup> Kinsella 2008, 163. Tutti i corsivi nelle citazioni, qui e di seguito, sono già nei testi originali.

<sup>16</sup> E si legge ancora: “Paradise is colonisation, it is theft, it is subjugation, I reject the pleasuring of ‘illumination’. But in our children I do find hope. I survive examinations of hope in this context. For: As my cosmology fades, Tim’s / forms a birthing star and brightness”. (Kinsella 2008, 162).

ipotesto della *Commedia*. “Libertà va cercando” (*Purg.* I, 71) diceva Catone di Dante, e poco dopo nel secondo canto il *viator* sente risuonare il salmo che ricorda l’uscita del popolo dell’Alleanza dalla terra della sottomissione: “*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*”, cantano le anime nel loro viaggio verso il purgatorio (*Purg.* II, 46). Il viaggio di Dante è quello della *peregrinatio* terrena di ogni essere umano verso la liberazione dai propri limiti, verso la realizzazione del proprio essere in una dimensione che può essere solo quella celeste, trascendentale, della città di Dio, del “popol giusto e sano” (*Par.* XXXI, 39), dove ogni cristiano è *cives*. Quelli dell’opera di Kinsella sono viaggi al plurale, quasi peregrinazioni senza vera mèta, esplorazioni, divagazioni da ogni finalità, senza teleologia e senza teologia. Anzi, non sono neppure viaggi, si è veramente sempre sugli stessi *five-and-a-half acres*, luogo di ritorno costante della poesia.

Ma se si guarda bene i *journeys* di Kinsella non sono così privi di corrispondenza con il viaggio di Dante. Anzitutto c’è una ricerca della responsabilità e di una dimensione etica, ma anche della felicità terrena, quella felicità che si intravede nell’obiettivo di costruire una dimensione domestica responsabile, nella focalizzazione dell’*hic et nunc*, non solo per ‘zumare’ su una realtà minima per vederla meglio, capirla meglio, ma per viverla meglio, per assaporarla appieno, nei suoi minimi dettagli, che sono, particolarmente per questa poesia, i dettagli della sua biosfera, del suo ecosistema, che include piante, fiori, animali, insetti, che vivono a fianco dell’essere umano, di cui questi ha bisogno per una piena realizzazione di sé. L’osservazione e la rappresentazione di questo mondo si carica dell’immaginario dantesco, come vediamo per esempio nella rappresentazione delle falene (“hundreds of moths”) che, cadendo sulla sabbia, appaiono come angeli: “In dull / green light they are tiny angels”, presagi però di una realtà sconvolta: “angels, like spent nuclear fuel, / toxify in their different forms, / boomerang back into sacred lands” (Kinsella 2008, 9-10). Oppure sono gli uccelli che hanno l’aspetto purgatoriale: “All birds celestial, moving through purgatorial / vapours, ascending from trees glowing gold, / ... —cutting across cornices, / levels, layers, circles, rings— ” (Kinsella 2008, 134).<sup>17</sup> Oppure sono i fiumi, che richiamano il fiume di luce dell’Empireo: “We cross river after river, / dry deep into their beds, riparian / fragility, cauterising winds // whipping sand and dust / into an effluvium of white rose / we imagine brought in // from elsewhere” (Kinsella 2008, 246).<sup>18</sup> O sono le lucertole che ostacolano il suo cammino come le Erinni di Dite, davanti alle mura della città infernale di *Inferno* VIII (“The blue-thongues, fallen angels, interrupt / my way”, Kinsella 2008, 303). Anche questi viaggi di Kinsella mirano a una liberazione dall’idea stessa del male, quello che brucia le foreste, che uccide animali, che stravolge i territori, che distrugge le

<sup>17</sup> Più avanti gli uccelli celesti sono persino elencati, si tratta di “pink and gray galah, / ring necked parrot, kookaburra, azure kingfisher, / sacred kingfisher, rainbow honeyeater, crow, / ...”. L’elenco occupa sei delle nove terzine che formano il componimento, a prova dell’interesse naturalistico preciso del poeta australiano, per cui l’elenco è la realtà stessa nelle sue molteplici manifestazioni, detta con i nomi, con le parole che fanno poesia.

<sup>18</sup> Nei versi successivi si danno altri elementi paradisiaci: lampi (“lightning”), frutti (“luscious fruits // burgeoning”), sinonimi di bellezza (“synonyms / for beauty”) (Kinsella 2008, 246).

possibilità stesse di vita. All'avvio della terza parte, in un componimento intitolato *Canto of the Forest and of the Hill (1)*, il poeta si mette in evidenza la contraddizione:

Driving down Greenmount Hill  
we see the city overlit with intensive  
housing, the last blocks of bushland

cleared away to placate the hunger  
for the Australian dream. The *resources*  
*boom* feeding realtors who scourge

And flay all that lives outside  
the human. And the human  
when it stands in their way. (Kinsella 2008, 278).

Questo componimento di *Inferno: Leisure Centre*, contiene riferimenti evidenti al primo canto dantesco, fin dal titolo. Ma qui infernale è la periferia della città, con i suoi cartelli immobiliari, la sua assenza di natura, segni di una modernità deviante. Il paesaggio, tra gelate invernali e soffocanti estati, costituisce la condizione infernale a cui occorre resistere.

Così si spiega il ruolo importante di uccelli e piante, di erbe e fiori, di insetti e animali in questo poema ecologico, in questa cosmologia; quindi si spiega la grande attenzione che la poesia di Kinsella presta al mondo prossimo su cui 'zuma' per vedere, conoscere, capire, e finalmente rispettare, ricostruire, far rivivere e vivere. Anche se raramente Dante 'zuma' sulla realtà naturale, (solo talvolta, come nella rappresentazione dei paesaggi purgatoriali, quindi terreni, o nelle similitudini quando presenta animali, insetti, piante, che fanno parte dell'ecosistema in cui ha vissuto), Kinsella da lui prende l'attenzione per la vita in ogni suo aspetto, che ricava da quegli amati e attentamente osservati *five-and-a-half acres* del giardino della madre e dei suoi dintorni con il monte Walwalinj.<sup>19</sup>

Ma non è solo questo che avvicina l'ecosistema di Kinsella a Dante: vi è in primo luogo l'atteggiamento responsabile, che porta l'uno e l'altro a fare una poesia altamente etica nel rispetto del creato, non tanto come "frate" alla maniera di Francesco, ma come ordine che l'essere umano non può alterare, senza rovinarlo e rovinarsi, perché rovinerebbe il suo stesso mondo, il suo proprio ecosistema che lo fa vivere. Se Dante fa appello alla responsabilità individuale e collettiva, che unicamente può condurre alla felicità come egli si propone di fare con il poema, richiamando gli esseri umani al rispetto del fine ultimo assegnato all'umanità, ovvero di raggiungere la felicità terrena e quella celeste, per cui il poeta si fa guida con il suo poema, quello di Kinsella è anzitutto un grido di allarme contro l'abuso del pianeta e la distruzione dei suoi ecosistemi, quindi un appello alla responsabilità verso la nostra casa comune, un tentativo di mostrare le

<sup>19</sup> L'idea di Natura che sottostà al poema e pensiero di Dante è ovviamente molto diverso da quello che possiamo avere oggi, come si può vedere negli interventi danteschi in Campana, Giunta (a cura di) 2021. Sull'impegno etico di Dante ampia è la bibliografia, ma mirata soprattutto all'aspetto etico di alcuni passi poema o del *Convivio*. In generale si vedano Ardisino 2009, Levine 2009, Mazzotta 2014, Battistini 2016, La Porta 2018.

contraddizioni del nostro presente che costruisce distruggendo, creando l'inferno dove potrebbe esserci paradiso. Per Kinsella le responsabilità individuali si allargano a esiti che superano persino la storia, perché stravolgono il pianeta e la sua vita, distruggendone la sua configurazione naturale.

La linea poetica che dai versi di Dante conduce alla riflessione ecologista ha ispirato altre due raccolte di John Kinsella, ovviamente non facendo di Dante un ecologista, ma usando la forza della sua poesia per denunciare i “subiti guadagni” (*Inf. XV, 73*) che ci fanno perdere di vista la salvaguardia del nostro pianeta. Nel 2017 Kinsella ha pubblicato un'altra raccolta dantesco-ecologica, *On the Outskirts* (Kinsella 2017), raccolta che pone in campo anche le illustrazioni di William Blake al poema di Dante, una triangolazione prospettica di grande interesse ed efficacia poetica. La raccolta si sviluppa ancora come viaggio, questa volta però in Europa, particolarmente in Germania, dove Kinsella è stato ripetutamente sia come *visiting fellow* al Centre for Global South Studies di Tübingen, sia come *visiting professor* presso l'English and American Studies Department della locale università. Compagno nei componimenti le città di Stuttgart, Tübingen, villaggi come Österberg, il Max Planck Institute, il Kloster di Bebenhausen, ma anche l'Irlanda con il Cnoc Osta Range o il Dunlough Pier, etc. Si tratta di una “psychogeography of hills and mountains, / and rivers and forests, rivers and cloud”, dove in effetti i luoghi sono l'occasione per riflessioni non solo naturalistiche, ma storiche e umane, per un'indagine esteriore e interiore che elabora gli elementi esterni per conoscersi e conoscere l'umanità e l'umano che c'è in noi.

La struttura riflette fedelmente l'organizzazione del poema dantesco, iniziando con l'illustrazione del canto I dell'*Inferno*, seguitando fino all'ultimo per un totale di 24 componimenti (ma nulla per i canti 5, 9, 10, 11, 14-17, 19, 22, 24, 27, 30, 32, 33, mentre due canti sono dedicati alle illustrazioni del canto sesto e persino tre per il 21, il settimo ha un componimento ma è anche ripreso nel successivo dedicato al canto ottavo, talvolta sono precisamente indicati i versi di riferimento, es. *Into Blake's Illustration to Dante's Hell, Canto 3 (lines 1-10), 'Leave every hope you who enter'*). Per il *Purgatorio* si ripete più o meno lo stesso modello sommando in totale per questa cantica 15 componimenti (ma nulla per i canti 3, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 31, 33, insieme i canti 5-6 e 19-20, due componimenti per le illustrazioni del canto ottavo e del nono, e per il 32). Meno frequentato ancora è il *Paradiso*, di cui si offrono componimenti solo per le illustrazioni del canto 10 (versi 72-87), 24 (versi 32-110) e ancora per i canti 24, 26, 28, 30, 31, per un totale di sette componimenti (per questa cantica).

La raccolta è non meno focalizzata sul problema ecologico, infatti si apre con *The Bulldozer Poem*, ovvero una specie di ode al bulldozer, ma non per lodarlo ed esaltarne i pregi, ma per mostrarne la potenza distruttiva e le finalità conformi ai nostri personali interessi, di noi consumatori insaziabili:

Bulldozers rend flesh. Bulldozers make devils  
of good people. Bulldozers are compelled to do  
as they are told. Bulldozers grimace when they

tear the earth's skin – from earth they came.  
 Bulldozers are made by people who *also* want new  
 mobile phones to play games on, *and* to feed families. (Kinsella 2017, 1)

Al poema sul bulldozer segue un componimento che si interroga sul ruolo degli spazi come memorie storiche. Sull'onda della seconda strofa di *Im Moose* della poetessa Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Kinsella considera il ruolo di illuminazioni improvvise che entrano nella vita, disturbano o guidano. Si può inferire che anche le illustrazioni di Blake del poema di Dante diventano luci “distracting, diverting, but fading with each step closer” (Kinsella 2017, 5), e sono perciò ragione di ispirazione, interferendo con la vita del poeta e generando poesia. Questo componimento e i tre componimenti a epilogo costituiscono una specie di cornice per i quarantasei componimenti di viaggi. Infatti, come ci sono i componimenti-prologo, così ci sono tre canti intitolati proprio *Epilogue* 1, 2, 3. Il primo è una specie di riconsiderazione del rapporto tra le illustrazioni di Blake e i canti di Dante, che risponde alla domanda se si tratti di “Sites of Memory” o di “Real Environments of Memory”. La questione riguarda tutta la raccolta, dove appunto le illustrazioni di Blake sono all'origine della poesia; ma in questione in questo epilogo sono tutti luoghi della memoria, ovvero i luoghi dove si è fatta la storia, spesso storia di violenze e prepotenze, che devono rimanere attivi, ma allo stesso tempo possono rinnovare gli odi. Sono messe in campo le stragi degli aborigeni australiani e delle vittime delle epurazioni naziste, ma ci si interroga anche su eventi della contemporaneità. In conclusione Kinsella proclama la necessità della memoria, anche se molesta, anche se noiosa, anche se non-poetica. Forse questa sola è la condizione di un progresso umano:

We see flowers bloom form concrete.

We see the images accruing.

We need memory as history.

Passed on. Site to site. A nexus. (Kinsella 2017, 115)

Il secondo e il terzo epilogo sono dedicati a due luoghi turistici, la cappella di Wurmlinger in Germania e le montagne di Cahah in Irlanda. Ambedue i luoghi aprono a un'inattesa chiusura, sul silenzio del cimitero il primo, dove “life finishes its dirge”, e sulla purezza della neve che tutto copre, che scende “thin but decisive, come suddenly, unexpected. Heroic?” (Kinsella 2017, 117 e 119). Se questi versi consentono una cauta serenità, il disastro viene ricordato in chiusura, oltre gli epiloghi, ancora con la traduzione di un poema, *Weltende* del tedesco Jakob von Hoddis, che chiude davvero la raccolta, ricordandoci le tragicità delle catastrofi naturali e della storia, disastri che non si possono cancellare (“nexus” ineludibile con il nostro presente).

In mezzo Blake e Dante. Qui la poesia di Dante interagisce filtrata dalle illustrazioni. Presenterò solo alcuni esempi molto diversi su come funziona l'elaborazione poetica

delle immagini di Blake, ponti tra il poema e la nuova poesia. I primi dieci versi di *Inferno* 3 sono collegati alla Notte dei Cristalli (*Kristallnacht*) ovvero ai disordini antisemiti della Germania nazista nel 1938, che diedero il via alla persecuzione. Non fu quello riconosciuto come inferno, indica Kinsella:

They didn't call it *Inferno*. They knew  
a thousand-year Reich when they saw it.  
Their names are being called out now.

Could they see what Blake saw, what Dante  
and Virgil confront, pass through: fire and ice  
burning as one, splinters of bloody glass,

teeth in Plato's cave? (Kinsella 2017, 11)

I pronomi soggetto “They” e il corrispondente aggettivo possessivo “Their” sembrano riferirsi ai pochi “non-Jewish / academics” che si smarcarono dal Nazismo, ma che non capirono fino in fondo la gravità degli eventi. Kinsella suggerisce che l’ambiguità della poesia è intenzionale “because it’s supposed to induce self-questioning in all ‘intellectuals’ who do not stand up against tyranny and wrong”.<sup>20</sup> L’occasione per poetare credo sia l’immagine di Blake, che non rappresenta veramente la porta infernale, ma una serie di stalattiti che ricordano forse il vetro della *Kristallnacht*, richiamata nei “gates”, da cui origina la riflessione sul ruolo degli intellettuali, di ieri e di oggi, di fronte al male.

La traversata della palude Stige, con Flegias come condottiero, viene ricondotta a una moderna immagine di *skyline* newyorkese:

Phlegyas reckons it will be a calm crossing  
with distant light dragging us on, the towers  
of New York splendid in conceptualist

sails raised and full, twin moons  
smothering with nurture, wealth bubbling  
to the surface through the hot goo

just as sea scouts and yachts ... (Kinsella 2017, 24)

A questo sfondo Kinsella collega una personale memoria d’infanzia, ma nulla di questa traversata trasuda angoscia infernale, come non la trasmette l’illustrazione di Blake, dove le onde non sono “sucide” (*Inf.* VIII, 10) ma appaiono pacate, dove lo sfondo è dato da una riva collinare illuminata persino dalla luce di un faro, che non ha certo la terrificata apparenza delle “meschite” (*Inf.* VIII, 70) della città di Dite.

Sembrerebbe che l’ansia ecologista sia scomparsa da questi versi ispirati da Blake e solo indirettamente da Dante, ma non è così. Essa resta il filo conduttore, anche se meno

<sup>20</sup> Ringrazio il poeta per avermi dato questa preziosa indicazione, rispondendo generosamente a una mia sollecitazione via mail.

ricorrente rispetto alla prima raccolta. Per esempio ritorna nel poema relativo a *Inferno* XXVI, dove è ricordata la foresta di Białowieża situata tra Polonia e Bielorussia, ultima memoria della foresta vergine che copriva l'Europa in ere geologiche. Ma il rischio grava su questa memoria per gli interessi del capitalismo polacco, ancora più aggressivo del capitalismo irlandese, rappresentato dall'Hell Fire Club, presso Dublino, dove "heroes of the tyranny" praticano lo sport più "extreme": "just who will shoot the last of the beasts?" (Kinsella 2017, 44). Se questo è un percorso da "odyssey into / revelation and extermination", con le sue "islands of Circe", i suoi "Lotus Eaters", i suoi "exorcisms of self", la reazione dell'io è netta:

And I have to declare my love  
of you – total, absolute – and my love of all that  
lives, all that grows through life. And so, here

I stand protesting the nuclear 'energy' cycle,  
and here I stand protesting from cradle to grave,  
and here I stand shouting out that reactors

infiltrated and sabotaged and mapped and reshaped  
will be the nirvana of those who hate the living,  
hate their own living lives, and would scorch paths

they have trodden. Can I love them?  
...

Or abdicate in favour of a new phone, or a new car,  
or deny them and covet inwardly. (Kinsella 2017, 45-6)

Riteniamo cruciali queste dichiarazioni collocate proprio nel canto di Ulisse. La sfida dell'andare oltre qui è rappresentata nel tentativo di cancellare quelle poche tracce di foreste vergini ("primeval") europee che ancora rimangono, nell'uccidere per sport gli animali selvaggi. All'opposto, il poeta pone con determinazione non solo la sua protesta contro i reattori nucleari, ma anche la sua dichiarazione di amore per un "you" che possiamo identificare come Tracy, la moglie. Questa dichiarazione si staglia nettamente in opposizione con l'ardore di Ulisse che lo porta a obliare moglie, padre, figlio e a bruciare per ulteriori conquiste ogni affetto. Questi versi ci confermano quanto altrove ho dedotto già dalla prima raccolta di Kinsella, che questo 'io', questo *agens* che agisce per la vita, ogni vita, è l'anti-Ulisse.<sup>21</sup> Ulisse, secondo Dante, per divenir del mondo esperto lascia tutto, pur di esplorare il mondo al di fuori dell'isola in cui gli è dato da vivere. Kinsella è esattamente l'opposto, è colui che viaggia senza viaggiare e nella sua poesia è proprio la realtà domestica a dare luce: egli opta per l'amore, l'amore per "you", Tracy, l'amore per "all that / lives, all that grows through life".<sup>22</sup> E questa opzione si rivela

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Ardisino 2022, dove tuttavia ho preso in considerazione solo la prima raccolta di Kinsella.

<sup>22</sup> Kinsella, sempre nella mail a cui mi riferisco alla nota 20 (*supra*), mi conferma questa lettura, aggiungendo: "the love is always Tracy (Beatrice figures transitioning through the different canticles), and the Ulysses irony is

come fonte di una conoscenza profonda, di un'esperienza del mondo nutrita da un ardore non meno gnoseologico, ma orientato al minimo, al piccolo essere vivente prossimo, che sia esso umano, vegetale o animale, quel prossimo che è sotto i suoi occhi ogni giorno, e che necessita di essere avvertito dall'essere umano che si sente padrone del tutto, che venderebbe tutta la ricchezza naturale per un "new phone", una "new car", per tutti quei "tools, part of [our] pragmatics" (Kinsella 2017, 46). Ulisse brucia nella sua "bubble", "floating in flaming bubbles", per la sua "odyssey into / revelation and extermination", l'io invece proclama l'amore, con i suoi limiti, ma anche per la sua straordinaria potenza:

[...] But love.  
Love shy and incomplete. Love without demonstration.  
Love the story. I am no better for this. I do not grow

faster and more lushly bathed in radiation of fairy tales,  
their origin deep in the forests, burning across rocky outcrops,  
heading down down into the valley deep where no one goes. (Kinsella 2017, 46)

Questo atteggiamento lo salva, con la salvezza pure del suo ecosistema, del suo mondo. L'ardore che Kinsella ci suggerisce come lettori della sua poesia è proprio di non metterci "per l'alto mare aperto" (*Inf.* XXVI, 100), ma di amare l'universo del minimo, in quello che abbiamo, perché altro destino non si dà, al di fuori di questo pianeta. Solo voli ravvicinati e non folli, forse "com'altrui piacque" (*Inf.* XXVI, 141).

Completa la trilogia dantesca di Kinsella il recente *Musical Dante*, di cui non è ancora uscita l'edizione originale in inglese, ma della raccolta sono usciti nell'anno del centenario di Dante, con traduzione italiana di Maria Cristina Biggio, otto componimenti (Kinsella 2021). Per questa raccolta non possiamo ancora parlare della struttura, ma risulta evidente che i versi del poema dialogano con la musica che hanno ispirato. Se in *On the Outskirts* era Blake a fare da ponte tra Dante e la nuova poesia, qui sono le musiche: *in primis* la sinfonia di Liszt sul poema, con altre composizioni e canti anche non direttamente dipendenti da Dante (da un album dei The Cure a un inno di Ildegarda di Bingen, per esempio). Le musiche interagiscono con i versi di Dante e generano nuova poesia, divenendo il presupposto per un lamento universale, un grido di denuncia, non privo di intensi anche se fuggevoli momenti di gioia, squarci luminosi, che si collegano alla poesia di Dante con combinazioni sorprendenti. La denuncia ecologista anche qui è fortissima, ma non si risolve in ideologia o discorso, si traduce ancora in poesia di una visività sorprendente: "And so, I make poems [...] in the poem / we

---

supposed to be one of return. So, I utilize a kind of platonic re-encounter with knowledge ... that for all my failings as a partner I will, through constancy and commitment to justice, eventually bring a worthy knowledge to the relationship. Ulysses brought violence to the suitors (for me, the destroyers and exploiters and abusers of the planet) in the end, but as a pacifist I try to bring non-violent acts of ecological protest and repair to the relationship in the end. Because I deploy a lot of irony, it's always hard to figure these things, but that's the underlying truth of it. The poem also expresses love for all life on the earth and a resistance against things that threaten it, of course. The poem plays with the poem as imagination and the need to make a better reality (no ecological destruction), and thus also inverts/plays with Plato's theory etc."

anatomise and at least announce that we care, that we respect // we appreciate we acknowledge, that we are grateful and will not presume” (Kinsella 2021, 84).

Al di sopra di tutto in questa raccolta c'è però la musica: “the five-fingered fugue ... far back”, o i madrigali di Kate Bjelland, “haunt-fury madrigals”, o la dolce sinfonia di Pacini, “the sweetness of Pacini’s sinfonia” (Kinsella 2021, 28, 46 e 58), richiamati per ricordarci che al di là delle parole e dei drammi c'è l'aspirazione a un'armonia, di cui la musica è allegoria sensibile. Essa fa da sfondo a tracce dantesche dense di significato: l'amore come filosofia, “advent // of love as philosophy then *pure* / love”, il senso di Dio, “a sense of God haunting our awe”, la gioia paradisiaca, “elation as it is spread throughout ‘paradise’”, o le scintille di un ardore che brucia di memoria e di desiderio per una “*peace* / ... / *under the clouds and bright planets*” (Kinsella 2021, 18, 28, 38 e 70).

I dettagli della biosfera, dell'ecosistema (di nuovo quello australiano), che include piante, fiori, animali, insetti, appaiono sì vittime, ma anche creature che, vivendo a fianco dell'essere umano, gli offrono squarci di serenità, di naturalezza, di cui l'umanità ha bisogno per una realizzazione di durata e rispettosa. Sono i piccoli “silver-eyes”, “fly-/by-night utterances to heavenly bodies that crawl / across the sky”; sono i girasoli in fiore “lighting the fuse / of light in dark and dark in light”; oppure è “the joy of a flower [...] but the flower is a gentle // if stunning blue – Cape bluebell blue –” (Kinsella 2021, 78-80) che offrono bellezza e armonia.

Questa attenzione alle minime creature, così come ai sopraffatti nativi del continente, determinano la componente etica della poesia di Kinsella, che si pone nel rispetto del creato, come ordine che l'essere umano non può alterare, senza guastare ciò che lo fa vivere. Ma un altro ordine si può costruire che rimedi alla perdita, un ordine che ‘cammini’ con il Sole (nei suoi molteplici significati): “a side-effect of the industrialized // world and we might pare / it back to tolerance levels, / to go with the sun rather // than disturb its liberal / disposition” (Kinsella 2021, 16). Anche il poeta non si sottrae alle proprie responsabilità: “I am an impure messenger / an unreliable transcriber // embedded in the consequence and waste matter / of Western ambition and capital” (Kinsella 2021, 18), ma proprio per questo non tace, e anche se coloro che “abuse people of trees and air and water” rifiutano la sua parola, egli, “the writer”, “insists / on the preservation of forests”, legando i destini alle origini “our origins intones over destinies” (Kinsella 2021, 74-78). Egli ha imparato la lezione che l'intellettuale deve dichiarare il male che vede, quindi ce ne indica in poesia le evidenze e le implicazioni, come già Dante ha operato con il suo poema, facendoci anche intravedere le possibili alternative per una vita diversa, coerente con il bene e indirizzata alla felicità anche terrena. Questo infatti è l'obiettivo di Dante per il poema, come indicato nella lettera a Cangrande, e questo appare essere la visione, oltre la denuncia, anche di John Kinsella.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Nella lettera dedicatoria del *Paradiso* a Cangrande della Scala si legge chiaramente che il poema è pensato per guidare ogni essere umano alla felicità in terra e a quella ultima: “finis totius et partis est remove vivere in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis”, *Epistola XIII* 15, in Dante 2014, 1506-7.

## BIBLIOGRAFIA

- ALIGHIERI, D. 2014. "Epistole." In C. Villa (cur.). *Opere*. Milano: Mondadori.
- ALIZADEH, A. 2010. "Rupturing Dante: John Kinsella 'Divine Comedy.'" In L. Armand (cur.). *Hidden Agendas: Unreported Poetics*, 130-149. Praga: Litteraria Pragensia.
- ARDISSINO, E. (cur.). 2009. *Etica e teologia nella "Commedia" di Dante*, Atti del Convegno, Torino 5-6 ottobre 2006. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.
- . 2022. "Ecologia dantesca. Il viaggio po-etico di John Kinsella." In E. Ardisino, G. Cuzzo (cur.). *Dal paradiso di Dante all'inferno ecologico. Leggendo la poesia di Kinsella*, 103-120. Milano: Mimesis.
- ARDISSINO, E., CUOZZO, G. (cur.). 2022. *Dal paradiso di Dante all'inferno ecologico. Leggendo la poesia di Kinsella*. Milano: Mimesis.
- ARDISSINO, E., RIZZARDI, B. M. 2022. "Orizzonti danteschi contemporanei tra occidente e Oriente (II)." In *Dante e gli altri classici: da Petrarca a Soyinka*, 91-103. Convegno Internazionale dell'ADI. Associazione degli Italianisti, Roma 28-29 aprile 2022. Roma: Bulzoni.
- BATTISTINI, A. 2016. *La retorica della salvezza. Studi danteschi*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- BIRNS, N., HUGHES-D'AETH, T. 2021. "The Kinsellaverse: The Writing World of John Kinsella." Numero monografico della rivista *Angelaki* 26/2.
- BRISTOW, T. 2013. "Fragmentary Introspective Observations: Animals, Emotions and Location in John Kinsella's Poetry." *Transnational literature* 6/1: 1-7.
- . 2015. *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*. New York: Palgrave Pivot.
- CAMPANA, A., GIUNTA, F. (cur.). 2020. *Natura Società Letteratura*. Atti del XXII Congresso dell'ADI - Associazione degli Italianisti, Bologna, 13-15 settembre 2018. Roma: ADI editore, [solo online: <https://www.italianisti.it/pubblicazioni/atti-di-congresso/natura-societa-letteratura>].
- KINSELLA, J. 2008. *Divine Comedy. Journeys Through a Regional Geography*. New York-London: Norton & Company.
- . 2014. *Divina Commedia. Viaggi attraverso una geografia regionale (poesie scelte)*. Tr. it. Maria Cristina Biggio. Rimini: Raffaelli Editore.
- . 2017. *On the Outskirts*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- . 2021. *Musical Dante*. Tr. it. Maria Cristina Biggio, Rimini: Raffaelli Editore.
- IWAKURA, T. 2006. "Oe Kenzaburo e Dante." In E. Ardisino, S. Stroppa Tomasi (cur.). *Dialoghi con Dante. Riscritture e ricodificazioni della Commedia*, 41-49. Roma: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura.
- LA PORTA, F. 2018. *Il bene e gli altri. Dante e un'etica per il nuovo millennio*, Milano: Bompiani.
- LEVINE, P. 2009. "Criticizing moral theory." In *Reforming the humanities. Literature and ethics from Dante through modern times*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- LUZI, M. 2001. "Per la salvezza". In *Per correr miglior acque.... Bilanci e prospettive degli studi danteschi alle soglie del nuovo millennio*, 727-34. Roma: Salerno Editrice.
- MALING, C. 2021. "A Western Australian Pastoral of Rust and Dust." *ISLE. Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28/2: 662-685.
- MAZZOTTA, G. 2014. *Confine quasi orizzonte. Saggi su Dante*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.
- MOORE, C. 2011. *Crossover: An American Bio*. Rochester Hills: Grace Pub. Co.
- MOORE, G., BRISTOW, T. 2014. "Alert, but Not Alarmed: Emotion, Place, and Anticipated Disaster." in J. Kinsella, "Bushfire Approaching." *Philological Quarterly* 93/3: 343-359.
- MURRI, S. 1996. *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, Milano: Il Castoro.
- OE, K. 1997. *Gli anni della nostalgia*. Tr. it. Emanuele Ciccarella. Milano: Garzanti.
- REED, M. 2010. "John Kinsella's Anti-Pastoral: A Western Australian Poetics of Place." *Antipodes* 24/1: 91-96.

*Robert Rauschenberg. Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art. 2017.

RYAN, J. C. 2021. "A Touch of recognition. Wetlands in Australian Poetry." *ISLE. Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28/3: 890-916.



HÉLIANE VENTURA

## FROM COCITO TO AVALON VIA SHAFT LAKE

*Collapsing Story Frames in “Pictures of the Ice” by Alice Munro*

**ABSTRACT:** Alice Munro’s “Pictures of the Ice” is a reflection on betraying and being betrayed that aggrandizes the ordinary to epic proportions and expands the personal and the local into the historical, the mythical and the canonical. Her pictures of the ice look like ordinary snapshots of a Canadian winter phenomenon, but they are indexed to several canonical counterparts evidencing felony and ranging from Dante’s frozen lake at the bottom of the *Inferno* to James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) or James Galt’s *Bogle Corbet or the Emigrants* (1831) and including references to Walter Scott’s *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808) as well Tennyson’s “The Passing of Arthur” from *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885). Through the synchronisation of the distant and the near, the personal and the historical, the legendary and the biblical, Munro collapses frontiers between the infinitely small and the infinitely large and generates a new topography of the moral universe.

**KEYWORDS:** Treachery, Alice Munro, Dante, James Hogg, John Galt, Alfred Tennyson.

In Dante’s *Commedia*, down the ninth circle of Hell, at the lowest point of the abyss, there lies a frozen lake called Cocito which is divided in four parts: Caina reserved for those who have been traitors to their family, Antenora for those who have been traitors to their native land, Tolomea for the traitors to their guests and Giudecca for the traitors to their benefactors. Dante represents treachery as the most serious crime of all and Satan himself is locked in ice at the very bottom of the pit forever chewing and mangling in his triple mouth the bodies of three arch-felons, the most reprehensible traitors in the history of mankind: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

In her story entitled “Pictures of the Ice” from *Friend of My Youth* (1990), Munro seizes the theme of treachery against one’s family and against one’s benefactors to represent the death of a minister of the United Church in a frozen lake. The minister is said to have drowned in a boating accident North of Thunder Bay in a lake called Shaft Lake. “Shaft” is a very polysemous word that can designate a pole, a rod, a ray of light, or a vertical enclosed space but when it is used in its verbal form in vulgar language it means to take someone in, to betray someone’s trust. The story that begins with the revelation of a drowning in Shaft Lake revolves around a series of breaches of faith. However, the felons are no ordinary traitors. They present themselves or are described as “justified traitors”, vindicating their acts of treachery in the name of a higher good that justifies the means they deploy to achieve their deviated transcendent aim.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the metamorphosis of the figure of the traitor in Munro's treatment of the theme of deception.<sup>1</sup> Not only does she revisit the Dantean hypotext, but she also aggregates several other canonical or lesser-known figures of the traitor to the construction of her own characters in such a way that she creates a dialogical interchange between biblical, historical, legendary, and fictional figures drawn from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Victorian and the contemporary period. Her multi-directional and multi-temporal network of cross-references constitutes a reversal of commonly held assumptions about treachery leading to an ethical reassessment that generates a new topography of the moral universe through a subversive and ironic mitigation of guilt combined with a feeling of wonder.

The story revolves around three main characters, each of them engaging in acts of treachery, defined as a "violation of allegiance or of faith and confidence" (Merriam-Webster). Austin Cobbett, a retired minister of the United Church, invents a fake scenario and deludes the people who care about him. He tells his grown-up children and the community he has lived in for many years that he plans to marry a rich widow in Hawaii and live the leisurely existence of a contented pensioner, walking the sandy beach of a mundane paradise. He shows likely photographs to cover up for the fact that he has accepted a new posting as a minister in a remote community in Northern Ontario, where he will voluntarily or involuntarily get drowned in a treacherous lake.

The second main character is Austin's housekeeper, Karin Duprey, whose life is shadowed by a traumatic event: her baby died of meningitis during a winter storm when she and her husband were drunk and the road to the hospital was blocked. She left her husband in the wake of this trauma and experiences a bitter resentment against him. Austin offers her a job as a housekeeper to nurse his dying wife and finally entrusts her with the disposing of his material possessions when he leaves the community. She steals from him a few costly items that have taken her fancy.

The third character is Brent Duprey: Karin's former husband and Austin's former protégé. Brent is rescued from drunkenness by Austin who nurses him back to soberness. He becomes a hardline teetotaler and requires Karin to quit drinking and smoking causing her to leave him. He eventually shifts Austin out of the temperance house he had created and takes full control of the renamed establishment with several radicalized followers.

Each of these characters appears as a confirmed sinner: Austin is a liar, Karin is a thief, Brent is autocratic, ungrateful, and self-serving. All of them betray the confidence that has been placed on them and yet the story does not rest on clear-cut binary oppositions but rather on reversals of generally accepted ethical values. Munro performs a reevaluation of the meaning of deception, a transvaluation destined to probe its deeper

---

<sup>1</sup> I wrote an early paper on this story entitled "The Ordinary as Subterfuge" in which I did not investigate the numerous hypotexts Munro resorts to but concentrated on the linguistic deployment of narrative traps and red herrings, as well as the use of phrasal verbs, and I do not quote my former analyses in this paper.

significance. She conveys the sense that, far from doing damage to the community, Austin's lies ensure the continuance of his apostolic mission. If he had told the truth about being hired in a remote community of Northern Ontario, he might have been deterred from joining the faithful of his new parish because of the spartan terms of the contract. His lies and deceptions are acts of self-sacrifice that liken him more to a redeemer than to a traitor. Austin does not cast the figure of a traitor against his own family like Napoleone or Alessandro degli Alberti in Dante's *Inferno* (*Inf.* Canto xxxii, 42-138). Munro rescripts the figure of the traitor against his family by giving him the appearance of an ascetic, a saint, or a spiritual hero who at the age of 70 is willing to deny himself the amenities of a pension in order to be closer to those who are in need of spiritual enlightenment.

Some critics have gone as far as to suggest that Austin intended to go to Northern Ontario to commit suicide and covered the suicide with an imaginary tale of remarriage in Hawaii (de Pap Carrington 1991). This is a hypothesis that cannot be easily dismissed, as it reinforces the treacherous nature of the minister of the faith, who would not only commit the sin of lying but also of taking his own life, but I propose a different interpretation that relies on the symmetry of the depiction of three sinners in Munro's carefully designed story. Munro does indeed portray three traitors, but she also depicts three people who ironically vindicate their felony. Austin lies in order to save the souls of the northern parishioners who are left without pastoral care. Karin steals in order to heal her wounds. Brent shifts out Austin to impose stricter obedience and a more radical Christian practice.

Karin's vindication of her deceitfulness is particularly duplicitous. Karin has been entrusted with clearing out Austin's house. Austin wants to donate all his material possessions to the Temperance house which is now controlled by Brent. Out of respect for other people's taste, he has chosen to sell his goods by auction and present Lazarus House with the resulting amount in cash. He has suggested that Karin could keep a vacuum cleaner, but she feels dissatisfied with his offer and chooses instead to appropriate: "A willow-pattern plate. The blue-and-gray flowered curtains. A little, fat jug of ruby-colored glass with a silver lid. A white damask cloth, a tablecloth that she had ironed till it shone like a frosted snowfield, and the enormous napkins that went with it [...] Just as a start, she has already taken home six silver spoons in her coat pocket" (149). Karin not only steals these items from the minister, but she also depletes the possessions that will be converted into cash for Lazarus House. The comparison of the tablecloth to a frosted snowfield is remarkably congruent because it ties in with the frosted surface of the northern lake where Austin drowns. Both Austin and Karin are singled out as traitors having affinities with Cocito, the frozen lake of Hell.

Despite her unabashed stealth, Karin experiences no guilt, on the contrary: "she feels approved of – a most unexpected thing" (155). Karin convinces herself that she is doing no wrong, and the comparisons that are used are indicative of the sense of rebirth that she experiences with her new acquisitions. The stolen tablecloth is said to be very heavy

and to weigh “as much as a child” and she imagines the matching napkins flopping out of wineglasses “like lilies” (149). The comparison of the weight of the tablecloth to that of a child deserves examination. Karin has lost her child after failing to bring down his temperature with wet towels. The emphasis on the weight of the immaculate tablecloth and on the purity of the lily-like napkins acts as a compensatory mechanism that imaginatively makes up for her lack and justifies her choice of acquiring them by stealth. They also play an ambiguous healing role when she imagines herself redecorating her rooms with them: “A person sitting in such a room could turn and floor anybody trying to intrude. *Was there something you wanted?*” (149; italics not added). Karin literally turns herself into someone else, as evidenced by the use of italics in the text, which highlight the fact that she adopts the dismissive tone of superiority of the minister’s wife, in order to take revenge for the humiliations she has been subjected to.

The use of the verb “turn” is particularly remarkable because it is recurrently used throughout the story. When Karin was sitting in the doughnut place drinking a cup of coffee, she commented on Austin’s alleged decision to remarry and leave for Hawaii: “She swung around on the stool and said, ‘Listen, I could have told you he’s changed” (138). Similarly, Austin is first presented as trying new clothes in the local store and “turning around” to answer a newcomer (138). The house of temperance he created was originally called “Turnaround House” before Brent renamed it “Lazarus House”.

If a turnaround means a positive change, an improvement, it also designates “any change from one thing to its opposite” (Cambridge Dictionary) and as such it can easily be associated with a turncoat, that is to say someone who shifts allegiance and “switches to an opposing side or party” (Merriam-Webster). Brent evidences his propensity to change sides radically when he switches from irresponsible drunkenness to religious fanaticism, shifting Austin out of turnaround house in the meantime. Brent is a shifty character, presented as particularly obnoxious and offensive through Karin’s perspective. However, Austin casts a different look on his shortcomings and he stands up for Brent when he says to Karin: “Who’s to say whether Brent’s way isn’t closer to God than mine is, after all?” (142). Ironically enough Brent is being vindicated by the very man he ungratefully shifted out of his legitimate position. All three characters are eventually presented as justified sinners, whether the end allegedly justifies the means as the case occurs for Austin, whether they strain to justify themselves as Karin does, or whether they are justified by others as Brent is.

By vindicating or making her characters vindicate themselves, Munro departs from the Dantean tradition in which traitors are hopelessly and irremediably locked in ice at the bottom of the infernal pit. She draws closer to another canonical text which is related to her family history, the Gothic narrative written by her ancestor James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The eponymous character of Hogg’s novel, Robert Wringhim, is a man with a mission, who feels directed by God and allowed to override commonly held notions of good and evil. Robert Wringhim feels himself justified by his Calvinist faith and antinomian beliefs in ridding the world of

unbelievers. Controlled by Gil-Martin, a supposed incarnation of the devil, he is prompted into familicide and the murder of reprobates before eventually committing suicide. Through kaleidoscopic fragmentation and a clever process of stories embedded one within another, Hogg achieves in this novel a striking de-legitimizing of the pursuit of truth, while exposing the excesses of ultra-Calvinist fanaticism. Munro has picked up from Hogg the themes of bigotry and self-delusion and adjusted them to a twentieth-century cultural and religious environment. In her story, the excesses of the zealots are no longer related to antinomian beliefs and the violence exerted is toned down. By shifting Austin out of his house, Brent commits a parricide which is only symbolic. However, his paranoid sense of being invested with a mission is closely related to Robert Wrighim's and the theme of self-delusions permeates the story. When Karin feels justified in her acts of stealing, she deludes herself into legitimizing what she is not entitled to do. When Austin lies and possibly commits suicide, he goes against the tenets upon which he had built his Christian life.

Munro's characters are traitors who disguise the truth of their conduct to others but first and foremost to themselves. They blur the boundaries between sincerity and treacherousness at the same time Munro blurs the boundaries between different story frames. By locating one of her traitors in a frozen lake and by allowing all of them to justify their treason through their own delusions, she collapses the frontiers between two very remote story frames while simultaneously suggesting further possibilities, through onomastics or partial quotations. Onomastics are particularly revelatory since one cannot overlook the fact that Munro's main character is given almost the same name as another Scottish, nineteenth-century hero. Cobbett is the close homophone of Corbet, which is the family name of the eponymous hero of John Galt's novel: *Bogle Corbet, or The Emigrants* (1831). This novel in three volumes strikingly bears the same epigraph at the beginning of each volume: "Truth severe by fairy fiction dressed," taken from Thomas Gray's *The Bard*. This is a framing device which, as demonstrated by Angela Esterhammer (2011), "blurs the boundary between truth and fiction" (175). It also helps to blur the boundaries between one fiction and another as there is little doubt that Munro, in "Pictures of the Ice" has borrowed her main character's name from John Galt and given him several of her predecessors' features.

"Pictures of the Ice" strikingly opens with Austin Cobbett dressing himself up in a light and youthful disguise in preparation for his make-believe trip to Hawaii. Munro literalizes Galt's epigraph "truth severe in fairy fiction dressed" by allowing her character to dress himself up in fancy clothes and hide his real, stern intentions. Austin Cobbett appropriates the epigraph of Galt's novel to shaft the community. In addition to the close homophony between the male heroes' names and the initial insistence on tampering with truth, there are more similarities between the long nineteenth-century Scottish novel and the contemporary Canadian short story, closely united by a network of correspondences.

Consider the main protagonist of Galt's novel. Bogle Corbet is originally Jamaican born of Scottish planter parents. He is sent back to Scotland for his education and

chooses the profession of Glasgow merchant. He goes into partnership with another merchant, but his business falters and he is wrongly made to bear the entire responsibility for this failure. In the second volume, he ventures to the West Indies to try to repair his losses, and on his return to Great Britain, he marries and tries again to improve his financial prospects. This second attempt fails once more and he sets sail for Upper Canada where, in the third volume, he establishes a settlement named Stockwell. In Canada, he is more successful, yet the novel ends on a very pessimistic note, Bogle Corbet asserting that he has emigrated too late for his efforts to be fruitful. Bogle Corbet finally strikes the figure of the depressed romantic hero who has arrived too late in a world that was too new, a figure inherited from Goethe and Alfred de Vigny.

Bogle Corbet's fate is constantly opposed to that of Eric Pullicate. As Bogle Corbet gradually loses ground, so Eric Pullicate thrives, in a symmetrically inverted manner, and there lurks the constant suspicion that Pullicate's prosperity is indexed to Corbet's failure. Pullicate is described through an oxymoron, he is called "a virtuous Iago" (202, Vol. II). Although it is not made quite clear, his sudden fortune has a preternatural quality.

As for Austin Cobbett, he is presented in parallel with Brent Duprey whose success is similarly indexed to Austin's failure. Brent eventually dispossesses Austin of his greatest success, the house of temperance he had initiated, and turns the community against him. Both the novel and the short story introduce characters who confront rivalry and are led to emigrate or relocate. In the words of James Galt's narrator, they are characters who have decided to "cross the roaring billow, to wrestle with the primitive forests and dare the shelterless hardships of its labyrinth" (231, Vol. II). Bogle Corbet has literally crossed the ocean to settle in the dark forests of Canada, Austin Cobbett has left the safety of his small southwestern Ontario community, Logan, and ventured into the hostile North.

Another link between Corbet and Cobbett is their proselytizing zeal and their desire to bring about a change or a turnaround in their compatriots' lives. Bogle Corbet offers practical advice for potential settlers, all through the novel, and in an extended appendix.<sup>2</sup> Austin Cobbett is a stern minister responsible for the reformation of sinners who means "to wear himself out, quick, quick, on people as thankless as possible" (Munro 1990, 154). Through the delineation of the colonial or religious zeal of their characters, both Galt and Munro position themselves at intersecting worlds: the world of letters, corporate finance, and colonial expansion for Galt, the world of literature and metaphysical enquiry for Munro, who voices deeply repressed Presbyterian anxieties about predetermination, salvation, and damnation.

The common denominators between the two works are not limited to the delineation of romantic and depressed heroes wasted by a sense of failure. The novel and the short

---

<sup>2</sup> This type of propaganda testifies to Galt's engagement in the literary marketplace as a writer complicit with the Canada Company's goal of selling specific tracts of land at a profit.

story also incorporate common motifs directly drawn from travel literature, which are particularly concerned with the description of a sensational or exotic landscape. At the end of the second volume of Galt's novel is the description of an iceberg:

At sunrise in the morning, we had sailed out of the fogbank which then appeared like a stupendous chalky cliff stretching across the ocean; but as the day brightened, a light breeze blew out, and it thinned without disappearing, till all the transparent East became as it had been ground like the moon shape of a lamp, preserving its outline as distinctly as real glass. When the sun at last shone over its edge, the glory was as dazzling as when he looks from the unclouded horizon of the ocean. (254, II)

This description is particularly striking because it operates several metaphoric reconfigurations: as it transforms the iceberg into a lamp, it joins the outside and the inside, the natural and the man-made, the otherworldly and the homely. It also brings together further antithetical elements: East and West, Northern imaginary and Oriental exoticism, the proximity and transparency of a clearly delineated outline, and the distance of moon-like artefact. Through its weaving of opposites, Corbet's description of the iceberg is a purple passage which extends the conjunction of opposites, as can be noticed in the following description:

The vast peaks, cliffs and pinnacles were like a gorgeous city with all its temples and palaces, shuddering as if shaken by an earthquake; the waters dashed from terrace to terrace, and every point and spire was glittering and gleaming with countless flames kindled by the sunshine. But it cannot be described. (256, Vol. II)

This pretended impossibility of wording the ineffable is a way to further emphasize the power of the written word: Galt has made the reader see the iceberg and register the impact of the antithetical elements that have been used to describe it, a monument of nature envisaged as a secular or religious edifice, the conjunction of ice and fire. In her analysis of Galt's novel, Katie Trumpener has contemplated the image of the iceberg as the ominous frozen embodiment of North America. She has contrasted the dark heart of Conrad's Congo and its horror of an inhuman colonial trade in commodities and lives to the icy heart of Corbet's Canada, with its white void reflecting back the hollowness of imperial industrial Europe, since Galt's description climaxes with the breaking up of the iceberg (Trumpener 2011, 43-56).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Katie Trumpener has given the title "Annals of the Ice" to the comparative analysis she has produced of Galt's novel, *Bogle Corbet* and of Munro's two volumes *Lives of Girls and Women* and *View from Castle Rock*. Surprisingly, she has not, to my knowledge, specifically discussed Munro's "Pictures of the Ice" and yet place and history, as well as the formation of empire, are particularly relevant to this story, in which Munro spells out the need to come to grips with one's involvement in a buried or forgotten history through clandestine references to *Bogle Corbet's* emigration to Canada. In a former volume, she dedicated part of her last chapter to the analysis of emigrant amnesia in *Bogle Corbet* (Trumpener 1997, 278-288).

Galt's novel provides descriptions of nature which are anthropomorphic and Eurocentric. He performs an "*artialisation*" of nature to take up a concept originally coined by Montaigne and taken up by French philosopher Alain Roger (Roger 1997, 16-20). The iceberg is transformed into a work of art, a process Alain Roger describes as "*artialisation in visu*". Through this process the iceberg is equated to a palace or a temple but later in the journey when the *Mirimashi* is drawing near the island of Anticosti, the narrator resorts to a gruesome simile; he associates the island lying black on the horizon to a corpse "covered with a mortcloth" (Galt 1831, 260, Vol. II). This simile does not artialise nature, it paradoxically humanizes it by endowing it with a human likeness at the same time as depriving it of life.

In her description of the Ontario landscape, Munro seems to have followed the same process of successive *artialisation* and humanisation. She does not provide the description of an iceberg or of the outline of an island, but she supplies a description of "unlikely formations" created by the snow and the ice covering the landscape which give the story its title: "Pictures of the Ice". Munro's pictures of the ice are transmedial since they are at the same time literary descriptions of a natural phenomenon and a literary evocation of the photographs that are taken of this phenomenon by the main protagonist. Austin Cobbett drives with his housekeeper to the lake to look at the ice and to take pictures with his camera and this is the description provided by the third-person narrator who delegates viewpoint to Karin:

Sheets of ice drop from the burdened branches of the willow trees to the ground, and the sun shines through them from the west; they're like walls of pearls. Ice is woven through the wire of the high fence to make it like a honeycomb. Waves have frozen as they hit the shore, making mounds and caves, a crazy landscape out to the rim of the open water. And all the playground equipment, the children's swings and climbing bars, has been transformed by ice, hung with organ pipes or buried in what looks like half-carved statues, shapes of ice that might be people, animals, angels, monsters, left unfinished. (151)

The references to walls of pearls and golden honeycomb conjure up a biblical vision of a new Jerusalem (*Revelation* 21.21) which, like Galt's description, perform an *artialisation in visu* because they transform an ice formation into a work of art while similarly synchronizing the otherworldly and the natural.

This enchanted landscape in which sheets of ice are compared to jewels is also evocative of the vision Dante experiences in Paradise:

E vidi lume in forma di riviera  
Fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive  
Dipinte di mirabil primavera.  
Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,  
E d'ogne parte si mettien ne' fiori  
Quasi rubin che oro circumscrive; (*Paradiso*, xxx, 61-66)

There are, however, major differences between Dante's Empyrea, and Galt's and Munro's landscapes: Dante's river of light burns with spiritual ardour, its magnificence lies beyond the human: it has the unadulterated splendour of celestial glory. Galt's iceberg is destabilized by the comparison with the earthquake, it is trickling, flowing, breaking, multiplying, whereas Munro's pictures of the ice are a "freeze": a series of snapshots which arrest movement and evolution and have a *rigor mortis* which is particularly uncanny. For instance, the homely metaphor of the sheets of ice, although heightened by the comparison with pearls has a disturbing resonance. They can be equated with winding sheets or a linen shroud because they find an echo in the last part of the description in which the children's swings and climbing bars are said to be "buried", signalling anxieties which are linked with the repressed. A secret lies at the heart of the description, a secret which, to resort to Derrida's use of etymology, is secreted by the landscape (Derrida 2001). The metaphors of "the sheets of ice over pale lumpy monstrosities" provide an additional clue that partly suggests the unspeakable event repressed under these shrouds of memory, all the more as what is "buried" in ice is precisely the children's playground. There is a ghost hovering on the playground equipment, that of Karin's baby who died of meningitis during a snowstorm when the road to the hospital was blocked up and his parents were too drunk to take care of him. The baby's return through the language used to depict the ice-covered landscape constitutes the major anamorphosis in the story: through the word "buried" we are made to see the baby hovering about the bright blank as a spectral embodiment of Karin's guilt.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida suggests that learning to live necessitates learning to live with ghosts (Derrida 1993). Both Galt's and Munro's landscapes are haunted: both are suffused with spectral figures or spectral intimations which have long been part of the vocabulary of Gothic romance, but which are revised in their respective works with slightly different inflections. In Galt's vision of the island of Anticosti, there is the outline of a place which is a "haunt" taken over by European settlers, and the memory of the shipwrecked European settlers who, stranded on the island, resorted to cannibalism to survive. The metaphor of the body covered with a mortcloth to designate the island together with the description of the iceberg breaking up condense the deadly hollowness of the colonial enterprise. In Munro's "Pictures of the Ice", the presence of ghosts seems at first to be more personal or familial: it points in the direction of private loss and mourning but as often with Munro, the personal develops into a larger framework and ultimately designates a politics of descent and affiliation which is not simply individual but cultural, historical, and metaphysical. After Austin Cobbett's death in a northern lake, Karin finds herself with the legacy of the pictures of the ice that he has taken and entrusted to her. This legacy entails a politics of memory and of mourning which continues to shape her life and dictate her actions:

Karin looks at these pictures of the pale, lumpy ice monstrosities, these pictures Austin took, so often that she gets the feeling he is in them, after all. He is a blank in them, but bright. (155)

The radiance of the ice formation acquires a supernatural dimension which lends the pictures a somehow sinister aspect. The bright blank does not seem to be constructed as the irradiating brightness of the godhead shining through the ice formation. What Karin sees is a series of lumpy ice monstrosities amongst which Austin Cobbett seems to be lodged.<sup>4</sup> These frozen monstrous shapes suggest the monstrous shapes of traitors locked in ice in Dante's frozen lake of Cocito rather than the primeval vision of rubies to be found in Paradise. Yet it is Munro's art to bring together unusual conjunctions. Munro's pictures of the ice combine the pearly gates of Paradise and the monstrosities of the Inferno and like Galt's iceberg and Dante's infernal lake they have "the appearance of glass and not of water."<sup>5</sup>

Further Scottish references are made in Munro's story through deviated or partial quotations. For instance, Austin, talking to Karin about his relationship with his daughter Megan and his son Don, exclaims: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first—we have children" (Munro 1990, 146). As rightly identified by Ildeko De Papp Carrington and Caterina Ricciardi, Austin partly appropriates Walter Scott's lines: "O what a tangled web we weave/When first we practice to deceive" drawn from *Marmion, A Tale of Flodden Field*, (Scott 1808, 161). Ricciardi rightly suggests that Austin puts the begetting of children and the practice of deception on the same level and develops her point like this:

Thus, like Marmion, he is weaving a web of deceptions, he is fooling his friends and community including perhaps – unlike Marmion – his own children. But how and why? The truth is that even Marmion's questionable exemplum is hardly matchable with Austin's small universe. (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 129)

I would like to suggest that Munro's art precisely lies in her capacity to match the most unmatched occurrences. Munro incorporates the immense into the minuscule, the canonical into the anecdotal, the historical into the personal.

For instance, in "Pictures of the Ice," she resorts to allusions or quotations which pave the way for the equation of an individual's life with the epic narratives of a nation. Consider the allusion to *Marmion*. *Marmion*, in the words of Ricciardi, is "the epic narrative of the overthrow of Scottish knighthood at Flodden in 1513 when King James

---

<sup>4</sup> Munro's pictures of the ice, like Galt's icescape and landscape, are particularly uncanny. They remind us that within settler nations, the land seems to remember, to keep an account: in the words of Gelder and Jacobs "a condition of un-settled-ness folds into this often taken for granted mode of occupation" (Gelder and Jacobs 1999, 182). There is a deadly legacy conveyed through the description of landscape in both the novel and the short story, the legacy of theft, fraud, violence, and other betrayals of the colonial past.

<sup>5</sup> "... e vidimi davante  
e sotto I piedi un lago che per gelo  
avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembante". Dante, *Inf.* Canto XXXII 22-24.

IV was bitterly defeated by the English amid ‘shafts’ thick as ‘snow’ (Scott 1808, 168)” (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 128). In her partial transference of *Marmion*’s lines to Austin’s discourse, in her naming the lake where he drowned Shaft Lake, and in condensing snow into pale lumpy ice monstrosities, Munro is surprisingly drawing a comparison between Austin’s situation and Marmion’s. She expands Austin’s loss of his house of temperance and Brent’s victory over him to equate them with the historical moment which marked the defeat of Scotland and the advent of a new era.

She reinforces this expansion by also introducing another comparison between Austin and King Arthur. When Austin, for instance, tells Karin “the old order changeth, yielding place to new” (149), he appropriates the deceased Arthur’s farewell words when departing on his barge for the Island of Avalon. This word-for-word quotation from Tennyson’s *The Passing of Arthur* performs several tasks at once. It synchronizes the local twentieth-century Canadian frame of reference and the Arthurian legend as presented through the Victorian poem. It aggrandizes the personal moment of Austin’s departure for another world into the legendary time of Arthur’s demise. It conflates the life of a modest minister from southwestern Ontario with that of a legendary king, after having synchronized it with Marmion’s. These series of combinations of one small experience with larger historical or mythical ones appear devoid of significance to Ricciardi who refuses the principle of matching what appears unmatchable.

In order to understand Munro’s very transgressive processes, one might investigate the ambivalence of the historical or legendary characters she has chosen to compare with her own characters. Marmion is often envisaged as the figure of “the arch traitor” (Ricciardi 2003-2004, 129). But Byron, for instance, provides a very different interpretation of the character when he writes in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:

The golden-crested haughty Marmion,  
Now forging scrolls, now foremost in the fight,  
Not quite a felon, yet but half a knight,  
The gibbet or the field prepared to grace;  
A mighty mixture of the great and base.  
(Byron 2009, 23)

Marmion is a blemished man, distinctly unheroic, who cynically betrays Constance de Beverley among other moral lapses, but he is also in the words of Pikoulis “tormented, solitary, brave, guilty, and finally ascendant in the anguish of defeat,” a description which partly matches Austin’s portrait and also resonates congruently with Arthur’s death (Pikoulis 1971, 749). Arthur’s last battle with his sister’s son is a war against his people and his knights and, as he himself acknowledges, he commits a fatal mistake by turning against them:

The king who fights his people fights himself.  
(Tennyson 1899, 72)

Like Arthur, Austin has lost the support of his community because he set up his house of Temperance according to his own vision and authority, building a community without taking into account the desires of this very community. Austin's comparison with Marmion and Arthur emphasises the disintegration of a community: it conflates the fall of Turnaround House with the defeat of Scotland at Flodden Field and the decline of the ideal community of Camelot. After the battle of Camlan, when Arthur dies at the hand of Modred, the son who betrayed him, he finally embarks for the island valley of Avalon which is described in these terms:

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns  
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,  
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (Tennyson 1899, 473-474)

This description of Avalon ties in with the way Austin describes his imaginary retirement in Hawaii. Like Arthur, he will heal his wounds on the sand "pure as cream" of eternal summer seas with "jewel-bright waves breaking" (Munro 1990, 140) and on the postcard he shows to Karin the name of the town where he will stay "is written in flowing letters like a silk ribbon" (140). This silk ribbon has a quasi-medieval look and assimilates the Hawaiian town to a fortified castle with a keep on which floats a standard. Not only does Munro bring together Avalon and Hawaii but she even suggests the possibility of combining the hedonistic mundane paradise of Hawaii and the spiritual splendour of Dante's Paradise as well as the Celtic Elysian fields of Avalon. In Dante's Emyrean paradise, primeval flowers scintillate like rubies because they are lighted up by sparks of light while in Hawaii, we find "lampposts with brimming flower baskets" against "turquoise skies" (140). As for the island valley of Avalon, it has been variously interpreted as the "island of apples" connected with Celtic mythology traditions of Elysium, but it has also been designated as the "isle of glass" inhabited by deceased heroes (Encyclopedia Britannica).

By choosing to make references to the passing of Arthur towards the island of glass, to the death of Marmion among "shafts as thick as snow" and to Austin's drowning in Shaft Lake, Munro extends the allusion to the frozen lake of traitors that has the appearance of glass in such a way that she brings together Cocito and the Celtic Elysian Island. Munro allows the inferno and the paradise to combine through similar semantic and metaphorical attributes.

With her pictures of the ice, Alice Munro weaves a rich intertextual web of cross-references based on the simultaneous building and collapsing of antinomic polarities. She simultaneously opposes and likens the pearl-like ice formations in Ontario to the glassy ice of Dante's *Inferno*, and to the celestial jewels of *Paradiso*. It is Munro's art to

foster a dialogue between stories and to dissolve antinomies by allowing the most unlikely rapprochement.

Her minister of the faith is no God-inspired scribe, no King Arthur of the round table: he is not guided to the Empyrean abode by Beatrice or finally led to the enchanted island under the beneficent care of Morgan Le Fay. He is humbly driven back from the lake by his maid because he is too weak to hang on to the wheel. Munro turns the canon upside down in unrepentant fashion by creating “a mighty mixture of the great and the base” (Byron 1809, 23)

There results the fact that Munro’s use of unreconciled contradictions does not make for a sense of collapse, waste, and desolation. On the contrary, she manages to engineer a re-enchantment of the world that is born out of new combinatory possibilities. At the beginning of Walter Scott’s poem “Marmion: a tale of Flodden fields”, the poet laments the disappearance of the heroic times of chivalry and romance:

It will not be—it may not last—  
The vision of enchantment’s past:  
Like frostwork in the morning ray  
The fancied fabric melts away; (Scott 1808, Canto 1)

Despite his sense of loss, he still asserts the possibility for “dwindled sons of little men, [...] to break a feeble lance/In the fair fields of old romance (*Marmion* Canto 1). It is this same possibility that Munro asserts claiming for her short stories an annalistic method, calling attention to lowly personae, and aligning her characters’ “small universe” with larger historical contexts through which the individual experience is uncannily aggrandized, highlighted, and reconfigured.

In “Pictures of the Ice”, the subaltern figure of the maid acquires considerable agency. Not only does she drive Austin back to safety after contemplating the ice formation along the shorefront of the lake, but she is the one who is finally entrusted with the pictures of the ice that Austin has taken, and she is the one who decides to put one of them in an envelope and send each one to three people. She sends one to Megan, Austin’s daughter, one to Don, Austin’s son, and one to Brent, her former husband. The story ends on the justification of her act: “She just wants to make them wonder” (Munro 1990, 155). In this last subversive gesture, Munro transforms anonymous letters into apostolic message. The magnificence of the pictures of the ice advertises the glory of creation and reinstalls a vision of enchantment distributed to a trinity of characters whose mission it will be to prove themselves true to the responsibility they have been entrusted with, a responsibility to celebrate the wonder of creation, the aim that Munro, the descendant of a Scottish bard has endorsed in the very first place.

## REFERENCES

- BYRON. 1809. "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers: A Satire." <<https://victorianweb.org/previctorian/byron/reviewers.html>>
- DANTE. 2021. *La divine comédie*. Trad. J. Risset. Paris: Gallimard.
- DE PAPP CARRINGTON, I. 1991. "Rubble or Remedy." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 44: 162-170.
- DERRIDA J. 1993. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée.
- DERRIDA, J., FERRARIS, M. 2001. *A Taste for the Secret*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- ESTERHAMMER, A. 2011. "John Galt's Fictional and Performative Worlds." In M. Pittock (ed.). *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, 166-177. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- GALT, J. 1831. *Bogle Corbet or the Emigrants*. 3 vols. London: Colburn and Bentley.
- GELDER, K., JACOBS, J. 1999. "The Postcolonial Ghost Story." In P. Buse and A. Stott (eds.). *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, 179-99. New York: Macmillan.
- HOGG, J. 1824. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. London: Penguin.
- MUNRO, A. 1990. *Friend of my Youth*. London: Vintage.
- PIKOULIS, J. 1971. "Scott and "Marmion": The Discovery of Identity." *The Modern Language Review* 66/4: 738-750. Stable URL: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3722978>>
- RICCIARDI, C. 2003-2004. "The Secrets of Intertextuality Alice Munro's 'Pictures of the Ice'." *Open Letter*, Eleventh series, n°9, Twelfth Series n° 1: 121-136.
- ROGER, A. 1997. *Court traité du paysage*. Paris: Gallimard.
- SCOTT, W. 1808. *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4010/4010-h/4010-h.htm>
- TENNYSON, A. 1950 [1899]. *Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. London, Macmillan.
- TRUMPENER, K. 1997. *Bardic Nationalism The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- TRUMPENER, K. 2011. "Annals of Ice: Formations of Empire, Place and History in John Galt and Alice Munro." In M. Gardiner, G. Macdonald and N. O'Gallagher (eds.). *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, 43-56. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- VENTURA, H. 2002. "The Ordinary as Subterfuge: Alice Munro's 'Pictures of the Ice'." *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online] 38. Online since 03 July 2008, connection on 22 December 2021. URL: <<http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/204>>

DANIELA FARGIONE

**MARY JO BANG'S *INFERNO****A Missile for Capturing Dante's Future(s)*

**ABSTRACT:** The multitude of appropriations, transformations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of Dante's *Comedy* through a variety of media and cultural productions testifies Dante's hold on modern imagination. Due to its plurilingualism, visual vividness, meticulous graphic descriptions, and polyphonic auditory allusions, this universally acclaimed masterwork has been made accessible to all ages and cultures. One recent example of controversial rewriting is Mary Jo Bang's translation of Dante's *Inferno* (2012), which includes references to contemporary (popular) culture and figures: from Mick Jagger to Freud, from Stephen Colbert to the Addams Family, from Bob Dylan to Ronald Rumsfeld and Qaddafi. Bang's version is here analyzed in the light of Edwin Gentzler's theory of post-translation studies to reflect on the translator's (sub)version and on the role of translation as rewriting in the age of digital revolution.

**KEYWORDS:** Mary Jo Bang, *Inferno*, Dante, Rewriting, Post-translation Studies, American Pop Culture

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head,  
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead.

Vladimir Nabokov  
*On Translating "Eugene Onegin,"* 1954

**Rewriting Dante's *Inferno* in the Age of Post-Translation Studies**

Imagine a contemporary translation of Dante that includes references to Pink Floyd, *South Park*, Donald Rumsfeld, and *Star Trek*. Now imagine that this isn't gimmicky – this is the hardest but most important part to imagine. Imagine instead that the old warhorse is now scary again, and perversely funny, and lyrical and faux-lyrical in a way that sounds sometimes like Auden, sometimes like Nabokov, but always like Mary Jo Bang. Imagine footnotes like those Eliot wrote for *The Waste Land*, covering everything from Eliot himself, to Virgil and Ovid, Lennon and McCartney, Mad Dog 20/20, and *King Lear*. (Lazar 2012)

In his *Bomb Magazine* interview to poet and translator Mary Jo Bang,<sup>1</sup> American novelist Zachar Lazar invites us to an exercise in imagination. Bang's 2012 version of Dante's *Inferno*, he argues, is as an eccentric "332-pages risk" (2012). Similarly, only more explicitly, Adam Fitzgerald wonders on the license of Bang's endeavor. He admits that "she has attempted to rethink, relive, and re-envision a 21st century *Inferno*," and asks:

Is it really too taboo, too hellish to imagine re-dressing the medieval Hell of searing feces and viscera, etc., with the likes of Eric Cartman and the Rolling Stones? The problem of license and invention when it comes to the fidelity of translation is a storied and pickled one, especially given how central the subject matter is to the 20th century's endless speculation from its most important theorists, the no-less endless appropriation from its most radical artists. (Fitzgerald 2013)

Only in recent decades has translation gone from being an ancillary activity in literary and cultural productions to a crucial creative practice enriching world literature and global communication. In the age of digital revolution, texts travel fast and widely. They circulate not only by moving internationally but also intersemiotically, being transcoded from one system to other forms of creative adaptations: films, music, blogs, cartoons, games, videos, fan fiction, TV series... As a consequence, "taking an existing text and copying, pasting, tweaking, tweeting, cropping, and recaptioning have taken translation and rewriting to a new level" (Gentzler 2017, 11). And yet, text-centrality seems to be still prominent in the studies of literary translation to the point that scholars such as Edwin Gentzler have recently called for a "post-translation studies turn,"<sup>2</sup> namely a new phase in translation studies that requires a broadening of its theoretical horizons and the expansion of its traditional, self-imposed boundaries. This operation also entails the concession that those very boundaries are permeable; their porosity gets unveiled, for

---

<sup>1</sup> Born in Missouri, Mary Jo Bang is author of several collections of "hybrid" poetry praised for "its linguistic energy, subtle imagery, and innovative technique" (Poetry Foundation), including *Apology for Want* (1997), *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans* (2001), *Louise in Love* (2001), *Elegy* (2007), *The Bride of E* (2009), and *A Doll for Throwing* (2017). She has earned different degrees that attest her wide range of interests: sociology, photography, medicine, and creative writing. She was poetry co-editor at *Boston Review* (1995-2005), and recipient of numerous awards and fellowships: the Guggenheim Foundation and the Bellagio Foundation, a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University, a Pushcart Prize, and a "Discovery"/*The Nation* award. From 2003 to 2006, Bang was director of the creative writing program at Washington University in St. Louis.

<sup>2</sup> The term "post-translation studies" was coined by Siri Nergaard and Stefano Arduini in their introduction to the first issues of *Translation*, a journal founded in 2011, where they offer new directions and push translation studies to a new phase: "We propose the inauguration of a transdisciplinary research field with translation as an interpretative as well as an operative tool. We imagine a sort of new era that could be termed post-translation studies, where translation is viewed as fundamentally transdisciplinary, mobile, and open-ended" (2011, 8).

example, when breaking the distinction between translations, adaptations, and rewritings. Gentzler aptly argues that,

... rather than thinking about translation as a somewhat secondary process of ferrying ideas across borders, we instead think about translation as one of the most important processes that can lead to revitalizing culture, a proactive force that continually introduces new ideas, forms of expressions, and pathways for change. (Gentzler 2017, 8)

Looking *beyond* translation, then, means to look at the ways texts interact with the world, while shaking crystallized beliefs and shaping innovative thinking. In this sense, the study of pre-translation conditions and post-translation effects in the receiving culture becomes fundamental to grapple with the altering power of the texts in motion (in terms of both geography and time), while raising questions around eroded concepts such as authorship and authority: “Theoretically,” Gentzler adds, “much of the discussion in adaptation studies still revolves around issues of equivalence and fidelity, terms from which translation studies scholars have long since distanced themselves” (121).

Gentzler acknowledges his debt to all those scholars whose pioneering studies on rewriting broke with the rigid paradigms and fixed hierarchical categories represented by the linguistic approach. As early as the 1990s, the “prophetic” (124) work of Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere opened the way to a ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies. In their co-edited volume *Translation, History and Culture* (2000), the two theorists strongly assert that the translation process does not take place in a void but is lodged in social and political reality that embeds ideology, cultural heritage, patronage, legitimacy, power, and renders the text vulnerable to multiple manipulations; the study of translation coincides with the study of culture. Being translation a form of rewriting in context, its primary goal is not the correspondence of words, phrases, and sentences as main translational units; neither should it be valued according to standards of accuracy and loyalty. Through translation, cultures construct ‘images’ of texts that are so powerful that the impact of the image of a literary work becomes even stronger and more affecting than its “reality” (2000, 9).

Moreover, in transdisciplinary post-translation studies, new figures get involved in the translating process: non-professional cultural operators, non-traditional researchers, and common readers cooperate to this multivocal activity, so that their contribution to the whole process cannot be neglected. This trend occurs despite the skepticism expressed by literary critics and more conservative translation agents who still believe that the source text exclusively is endowed with authority. As Susan Bassnett writes in the conclusion of her foreword to Gentzler’s volume,

Post-translation studies may annoy die-hards with overly rigid views about studying translation, but it may well prove the catalyst for taking the subject forward into a whole new stage of development

and positioning translation as a fundamental cultural condition underlying communication in the twenty-first century. (Bassnett 2017, x)

Predictably, Mary Jo Bang's transgressive translation of a world literature classic such as Dante Alighieri's *Comedy*, may "ruffle the feathers of classicists, translators and tamer poets who prefer to have the Florentine removed from the filth ... of contemporary pop culture" (Fitzgerald 2013). And yet, according to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, "[i]t is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them towards contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*" (1991, 439).

From the very first translation of the *Inferno*<sup>3</sup> to Bang's version in 2012, we can count around two-hundred translations into English, whose strategies vary from colloquial to more elevated prose, free or blank verse, and a prevalent number in *terza rima*, a proliferation that has prompted the poet Richard Moore to state that "the attempt to represent Dante's *Commedia* in our language is one of the most consistently and conspicuously failed projects in the history of English translation" (qtd. in Smith and Sonzogni 2017, xix). The issue at stake, though, consists in the nature and scope of the project that Richard Moore has in mind. Due to its plurilingualism, visual vividness, meticulous graphic descriptions, and polyphonic auditory allusions, Dante's acclaimed masterwork has been made accessible to all ages and cultures. The multitude of appropriations, transformations, reinterpretations, and rewritings of Dante's *Comedy* through a variety of media and cultural productions<sup>4</sup> testifies not only Dante's hold on modern imagination, but also the increasing role that translators and readers alike have acquired over time: "Translation ... is not just a process that happens in the translator's head. Readers decide to accept or reject translations. Different types of reader will require different types of translation" (Bassnett and Lefevere 2000, 5). Including Mary Jo Bang's (sub)version.

---

<sup>3</sup> The publication of the first English version by Henry Boyd dates back to 1785. It was followed by the other two canticles in 1802. In the United States, the first complete translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was published in 1867. In 1862 he co-founded 'The Dante Club' (later 'The Dante Society of America') with other poets and intellectuals (Charles Eliot Norton, Oliver H. Holmes, James Russell Lowell, George Washington Green) in the attempt to promote the appreciation and study of the *sommo poeta* in America.

<sup>4</sup> If in Italy the most popular example is given by Roberto Benigni's long-running comedy routine *Tutto Dante*, examples from the rest of the world include: Sandow Birk's *Comedy* (2004) set in contemporary America and later adapted into a film (2007); musical albums such as *Inferno* by German electronic group Tangerine Dream, *The Inferno Rap* (2005) by Eternal Kool Project, and *The Divine Comedy* (2013) by famous Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei, who also made a Lego portrait of Dante (*Dante Alighieri in LEGO*, 2016); video games such as *Dante's Inferno* (2010) and *Devil May Cry* (2001-2015); graphic novels *Jimbo: Adventures in Paradise* (1988) followed by *Jimbo in Purgatory* (2004) and *Jimbo's Inferno* (2006) by punk American cartoonist Gary Panter. Some of these projects are mentioned by Bang in her introductory note.

## Paratexts

Late modern and contemporary translations reflect an increasing visibility of the translator at work: introductions, prefaces, and notes are often included as paratextual devices which, according to Susan Bassnett, reflect “an increased attention to making clear the *habitus* of the individual translator along with greater willingness on the part of publishers to include such material” (2018, 75. *Italics in the text*). Although translators’ prefaces have always been present in most editions of Dante’s *Comedy* in English, Bassnett observes that they generally provide an overview of the author’s socio-political background, or information on the fortune of the poem. Few of them, instead, offer specific details on the translational choices and their relative motivations. As also argued by Jacob Blakesley, paratextual analysis is “essential to providing a diachronic vision of translation history” (2021, 373), as paratextual commentary reflects the translator’s ideological approach.

When holding Mary Jo Bang’s *Inferno* for the first time, one immediately realizes how different the book looks, as an object, in comparison to most translations of Dante’s *Comedy*. This is not a conventional literary product. Published in 2012 and selected as a Notable Book by The Academy of the American Poets (2012) and The American Library Association (2013), it is printed on quality paper, in an artbook format, and illustrated by visual artist Henrik Drescher.<sup>5</sup> His full-page, black and white, thick-lined drawings open each canto and are captioned with lines taken from Bang’s text, whereas smaller icons, mainly featuring on the margins, are interspersed throughout the whole book which thus situates itself within a longstanding tradition. In fact, starting from Botticelli through Reynolds, Doré, Füssli, Delacroix, Blake, Ingres, Dalí, Raischenberg to more contemporary artists such as Mattotti, Paladino, or Panter (just to name a few), many illustrators have taken turns in rendering the visual power of Dante’s masterpiece.<sup>6</sup>

Dresher’s operation thus repeats the many attempts to transfer the poet’s imagery to contemporary readers’ hellish world, clearly complying with the main purpose of Mary Jo Bang’s operation: to recast the *Inferno* in a new age by using contemporary language. In so doing, without ever sacrificing their personal idioms, they both engage in a form of cultural discourse. Take for example Canto V, where Dante locates the Lustfuls. Among the many renown sinners, we can meet “lustful Cleopatra” and “Helen / whose bad-girl behavior set in motion years / Of nonstop mayhem” (55). The illustration on the margin

---

<sup>5</sup> Henrik Drescher was born in Copenhagen in 1955. In 1967, he moved to the United States with his family. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but he soon quit to work as a full-time illustrator. His works have been included in several children’s books and regularly appear in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Rolling Stones*. See his website: <https://www.hdrescher.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Battaglia Ricci (2018).

ironically proposes a sort of Cruella de Ville, the pop culture icon from Walt Disney's *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, that synecdochally condenses all the female characters of this canto. With her curvaceous figure framed in a skin-tight dress and fishnet stockings, together with her irreverent temperament signaled by her unabashed puffing from a cigarette holder, she is carrying around two male puppies on a leash (one of which is in fact dotted) that are half human, half dogs, and are caught while copulating. Another example is given by the opening of Canto XI, when Dante and Virgil stop to rest behind a jumble of broken boulders to become accustomed to the foul stench that rises from the lower circles. Bang translates Dante's "profondo abisso" with the dense "crowded Alcatraz" (103), while Drescher eloquently draws a man with a gas mask that evokes all sorts of historical events: from the first use of chemical gas weapons in WWI to contemporary air-pollution and environmental challenges.

The book's rich paratextual structure also includes an introduction, where the translator offers an effervescent summary of the thirty-three cantos. Each one of these is accompanied by a rich apparatus of footnotes with information on Dante's text and Medieval Italy, and abundant explanations on a plethora of cultural and political figures of our present time included in Bang's rewriting. An essential part of the book is represented by "A note on the translation," which opens with the genesis of Mary Jo Bang's ambitious project, reveals the translator's intentions, and provides all the coordinates we need to read the text "on both micro- and macro-level" (Bassnett 2018, 82), a due act that begins with the acknowledgment of the context in which the translator has made her choices.

### *"Craft becomes becoming"*

"A Gallehaut was the Book." In her translation note, Mary Jo Bang narrates how in 2006 she stumbled in *Fig*, a collection of poems written by Caroline Bergvall, which also included "Via (48 Dante Variations)." This very unconventional poem was composed by collating the forty-seven translations archived in the British Library (up until May 2000) of the first three lines of Dante's *Inferno*. As a consequence, it is Dante's translations that become the poetic material or, in a way, the 'original' text. The different versions of the first tercet are not ordered chronologically but alphabetically by the first word or expression chosen by the translator ("Halfway...", "In the Middle of..."), whose last name, together with the year of publication, is quoted at the end of each excerpt. The baffling nature of Bergvall's poem lies in its power to locate each version within a context that has nothing to do with history and historical time; each sequence is in fact a variation of a variation endowed with an "incantatory quality" that results from an "unrelenting repetition-with-revision" (Bang 2012, 7). In this sense, we could say that "Via" evolves in a sort of *sound* progression: its constant unfolding from one translation to the other has

the purpose to capture the readers (or the spectators) and trap them in ‘a dense cage’<sup>7</sup> of sounds from which they cannot escape: the fact is that they cannot continue their journey – literally – beyond the first tercet. As Bergvall argues,

Unlike the graphic causal horror of linear travel, these point-by-point interceptions spin a spiraling musicality, its horror is abstracted, a build-up of interrupted motion, pulling together into a narrative of structure, stop-start, each voice trying itself out, nothing looped, yet nothing moved beyond the first line, never beyond the first song, never beyond the first day, the forest walls, my body walls. Having to look for points of exit, further in, further down, rather than out. (Qtd in Perloff 2003)

Initially, Bergvall’s poem was conceived as a performance that first took place in the year 2000 with the participation of Irish composer Cián Maher.<sup>8</sup> This dense accumulation of Dante’s matter adds to the poet’s breaths, to her pauses and silences, and finally creates a 48<sup>th</sup> invisible variation:

Using calculations set up via his software, he [Maher] unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice’s fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation.

“Via” is also a meticulous work of ‘copying,’ which raises questions on the nature of poetic creation. The translation process *per se* is not the fulcrum of Bergvall’s operation, which in fact does not invite comparison between versions. Her task, she explains in her introduction, is “Understanding translation in its erratic seriality” (Bergvall 2005, 65). Let’s take a look at the first five exemplars:

*The Divine Comedy* – Pt. 1 Inferno – Canto I – (1–3)

1. Along the journey of our life half way  
I found myself again in a dark wood wherein the straight road no longer lay  
(Dale, 1996)
2. At the midpoint in the journey of our life  
I found myself astray in a dark wood For the straight path had vanished.  
(Creagh and Hollander, 1989)
3. HALF over the wayfaring of our life,  
Since missed the right way, through a night-dark wood Struggling, I found myself.  
(Musgrave, 1893)
4. Half way along the road we have to go,  
I found myself obscured in a great forest, Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.  
(Sisson, 1980)

<sup>7</sup> Mary Jo Bang translates Dante’s “selva oscura” with “a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig.” (15)

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. <https://soundcloud.com/carolinebergvall/via-48-dante-translations-mix>.

5. Halfway along the journey of our life  
 I woke in wonder in a sunless wood  
 For I had wandered from the narrow way  
 (Zappulla, 1998)

As Marjorie Perloff remarks, the alphabetization “reminds the reader or listener that no two of the translations are exactly the same” (2003), and yet, in the process of collating the forty-eight variations, their translators – whose first names never appear – get effaced. Similarly, in her note, Mary Jo Bang concedes that “Reading the poem on the page, I was fascinated by the fact that while the simple language of the original three lines ... never changes, no two translations were identical” (7). These two similar comments reminded me of “A Translator’s Monologue,” an essay by Cynthia Ozick, where the writer argues that in order to contemplate the real possibility of translating poetry, “the translator must believe in certain impossible theses” (1991, 199) that she considers important, useful, and false. It is on the concept of falseness that Ozick prevalently focuses by reminding us of the Septuagint, the earliest complete Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, and the way it got translated (Ibid.). According to the old Jewish legend, seventy scholars were asked by King Ptolemy to translate the Torah to be included in the Library of Alexandria. The Elders “entered seventy separate chambers, and emerged with seventy copies of an identical text” (Ibid.). Ozick comments by admitting that of course this is a false tale, but that it is useful to reflect on how we assess a translated text.

Among the several false ideas about the translational process, we can find that “*Craft becomes becoming*” (201. Italics in the text), namely that the translator *becomes* the poet, i.e. that s/he feels “to *be* the poet, reborn in another language,” eventually assuming with her/him the same authority over the poem: “If a translation seems flawless, we take it to be authoritative; if it is authoritative, we trust its importance; if we can trust its importance, we know it will be useful. And by ‘useful’ I mean that a translation can serve as a lens into the underground life of another culture” (Ozick 1991, 199).

Mary Jo Bang explains that while trying “to stay scrupulously true to the narrative, and to what I took to be Dante’s intent,” she also “wrote as if I were some cyborgian hybrid, myself plus Dante’s text, the two parts behaving as if they were one mind, living in the present” in order to “allow the poem to speak with intimacy about the world we live in: the postmodern, post-9/11, Internet ubiquitous present” (Bang 2012, 8). The pleasure that she seeks in the encounter of Dante’s past with her contemporary time has the “primary role ... to demonstrate that Dante’s Hell never ages, nor do our basic human failings ever change – they only get enacted against a different background” (9). Bang’s rewriting, then, differs from Bergvall’s and Ozick’s operations in one fundamental feature that locates her work within a post-translation studies frame: she totally rejects the invisibility that translators are requested or assumed to attain and writes herself in the text.

According to Lawrence Venuti, if a translated work reads fluently, it is normally considered transparent, a desirable condition by most readers and publishers. What we normally ask a translation to do is “to efface its second-order status,” by producing “the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the original” (Venuti 1995, 7). But this process of domestication, Venuti adds, is “narcissistic,” since fluent translations provide readers with “the experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (15). Mary Jo Bang’s linguistic and cultural manipulations eventually challenge the notions of invisibility and authorship, as she produces a new text as much as the original writer did. After all, she is herself a poet and her version aptly feeds a long list of ‘translations by poets.’<sup>9</sup>

### Mary Jo Bang’s (Sub)version and Transcreation

More than once in his book on rewriting in a post-translation studies age, Edwin Gentzler emphasizes the transformative power of subversive translations as opposed to more static processes that do not contemplate experimentation. One cultural and theoretical area that he particularly values is offered by Latin American creative writing associated with Brazilian cannibalist movement. Gentzler explains that “the translation/rewriting approach for the *antropofagistas* is not a domesticating or foreignizing one, but *both*: importing ideas and expressions via translation plus rewriting those ideas and texts in the vein of the receiving culture” (Gentzler 2017, 70). When Mary Jo Bang appropriates Dante’s *Inferno* and situates the text in the new wave of rewriting, she still wishes to respect her source and the poet’s initial intent and claims that translation is “both homage and theft . . . It is a strange collaborative camaraderie” (10). At the same time, she aligns with cannibalistic translators, being “remarkably inventive, reorganizing European ideas in a new context, playing with signs, sights, and images in a way that allows for alternative insights” (Ibid.). In this sense, by concentrating on the circulation of the text in contemporary United States, her personal ‘variation’ might be considered a “transcreation.”<sup>10</sup> As Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff write in the

<sup>9</sup> The list includes, among others, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Ciardi, Robert Pinsky, W.S. Merwin, and Jean Hollander. Cfr. Ronald De Rooy. “The Poet Translated by American Poets. In Search of the Perfect ‘Trasmutazione musaica.’” In Ronald de Rooy (ed.), *Divine Comedies for the New Millennium: Recent Dante Translations in America and the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mzbd>. Also see: Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff 2001.

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘transcrição’ was coined by Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo De Campos who, together with his brother Augusto, was particularly interested in the renewal of poetry interpretation through artistic cross-fertilization. Music played a pivotal role, so much that they formed alliances with popular musicians such as Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé, and composers like Gilberto Mendes (Cfr. Jackson 2010): “Art translation holds the same tension in relation to the original as the musical interpreter does in relation to the composer. In this sense I can invoke the liberty that jazz singers and instrumentalists have, for

introduction to their volume: “Dante is known not only by people who once read his poem, but also by the far larger number who have never turned a page” (2001, xiii). Bang’s irreverent translation serves the purpose of creating a version of a classic poem that new categories of readers may appreciate: “I will be most happy if this postmodern, intertextual, slightly slant translation lures readers to a poetic text that might seem otherwise archaic and off-putting,” although she invites them, after reading it, “to seek out others” (11).

The seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death has offered scholars, poets, critics, and enthusiasts from all over the world innumerable opportunities to reflect on the *Comedy*’s enormous legacy. From the several interviews that Mary Jo Bang has released during this special year, we learn that when she set out to translate the *Inferno*, she heavily relied on over two hundred accurate translations (and relative commentaries) of the poem. Trusting that she could stand on the shoulders of previous translators, the parameters of the meaning were well-established (Borio 2015; King 2013). Accordingly, she was not concerned with her lack of knowledge of the Italian language; after all, she was in good company, since other translators who preceded her were not fluent speakers. This awareness gave herself “permission to do something new that would hopefully have the effect of extending the poem into the present” (Borio 2015). The question of ‘permission’ is in fact one of the most debated by critics in relation to Bang’s work, but the poet insists that her purpose is to “liberate” translation and the discourse around it, while distancing herself from the master/slave or loyal/treason dialectic (King 2013). Since many earlier translators of the *Comedy* opted for an eighteenth-century English to mimic Dante’s fourteenth-century vernacular, archaicism is prevalent to give the illusion that the poem is an artifact of a previous era. Contemporary (especially young) English speaking readers, however, would possibly feel disheartened by this remote language. Moreover, Dante wished for his poem to last. According to Bang, the poet’s choice to write in the vernacular rather than in literary Latin – a language frozen in time that would prevent *The Comedy* to change – is an effective strategy that affects the very reception and spread of the poem. Bang takes this argument as her own and, in the attempt to bring it forward into the present time, she imagines a translation that can mirror the specific variations of the languages spoken by the different characters. As a result, Bang sets a twofold goal: on the one hand, she proposes a text whose interpretability depends on

---

example, to give ‘their’ version of classics such as Gershwin or Cole Porter. There is a great difference between hearing ‘Summertime’ sung by Billie Holiday or Janis Joplin, each with a personal and unique reading of the song ... It is, above all else, a question of hearing” (Qtd. in Jackson 2008, 142-143). Also, John Ciardi, in his translation note to his version (1954-1970) stresses the importance that most Dante’s poets-translators attach to their sound search and their failures in providing exact sound equivalence: “When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognizably the same ‘music,’ the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano.” (Ciardi 2001, ix).

simple syntactical structures; on the other hand, she drastically drops the tone and register of the poem to make it closer to contemporary speech:

I wanted Dante's Hell to read as if it's a timeless mirror in which all of us can still see ourselves. To that end, I translated the poem into today's spoken English. I kept the story exactly the same, and the three-line stanzas exactly the same. In a way, I translated the original into the English that I thought Dante might use if he were a thirty-five year old American poet writing the poem today. (Borio 2015)

Mary Jo Bang's translation thus strives for a balance between compliance and deviation, two contradictory and yet coexisting modes of creativity.

In his "Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam stresses the relationship between form and content in *The Comedy*, and while suggesting that form drags the meaning, he also illustrates Dante's plurality of forms: "There is not one form in Dante – there is a multitude of forms. One is driven out of another and it is only by convention that they can be inserted one into the other" (1991, 13). Commenting on this idea, Bang argues that meaning might be compared to "an obstinate child and form is the insistent parent" (Borio 2015): in order to convey the same sense of forward motion made possible by the interlocking rhyme scheme of *terza rima*, she strives to reproduce the same sense of phonic inevitability by use of alliteration, repetition, assonance, and internal rhyme that could fit the established pattern. This is mainly due to the fact that English, in comparison to Italian or any other Romance language, has fewer words that rhyme; hence, her adherence to Ezra Pound's famous dictum that she adopts with a personal twist: "As regarding rhythm: [one needs] to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in [the] sequence of a metronome.' The fact is, I am always trying to replicate a voice in my head that only I hear and that voice doesn't speak in rhyming lines" (Ibid.). Her personal variation of the first tercet of Canto I, for example, runs as follows:

|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita | Stopped mid-motion in the middle                            |
| mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,   | Of what we call our life, I looked up and saw no sky –      |
| ché la diritta via era smarrita.    | Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost. (15) |

Despite its modernization, Bang's translation attempts at rendering the same musicality achieved by the *Sommo Poeta*, only in contemporary spoken English. The combination of "mid-motion" and "middle" in the first line reproduces the same sonic effect of Dante's text. Similarly, the "I" sound repetition provided by "life," "sky," and a few words in the following tercet, guarantees the same vowel effect of the Italian poem that Bang re-echoes by resorting to assonance. Moreover, she often plays with phonic resources in a game that is mainly graphic, such as the collocation of the word "leaf" exactly under the word "life." Worthy of note is also the last clause – "I was lost" – that Bangs decides to isolate between two full stops that become a sort of visual barriers, thus emphasizing the sense of entrapment ("a dense cage") of Dante the protagonist.

Another example that I wish to mention is offered by the opening of Canto V, where “Hideous Minos stands snarling at the entrance” (Bang 2012, 53):

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>“O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio,”<br/>disse Minòs a me quando mi vide,<br/>lasciando l’atto di cotanto officio,</p> <p>“guarda com’ entri e di cui tu ti fide;<br/>non t’inganni l’ampiezza de l’intrare!”<br/>(16-20)</p> | <p>Where they spin until they reach the designated ring.<br/>“Hey, you, who come to the hotel Woe,” said Minos,<br/>When he saw me, neglecting for a second his official duties,</p> <p>“Be careful where you go and who you talk to.”<br/>“Don’t be fooled by the fact that the door is always open.”<br/>(Bang 2012, 53)</p> |
|---|--|

Here Bang opts for economy: one line is completely effaced to permit Minos’ speech to be condensed enough to sound like street talk: his salutation – “Hey you” – could be either the verse of a song or a line in a film, and the reader is here invited to perform the same act of visual imagination that Dante wishes for his contemporary readers. And yet, Bang recognizes that her ‘transcreation’ embeds in great measure *her own* presence both as a translator and as a new original author: “Since I’m more or less ventriloquizing Dante, using the script he wrote, the characters will sound a bit like me. However, that’s true of all translation. It’s only a matter of degree” (King 2013). Again, this is a game of reflecting mirrors, and while Dante creates a parallel reality that he calls *Inferno*, his imaginary world truly reflects the harrowing world he lives in. Similarly, Bang’s new poem is a mirror of her own time and the strategy she eventually establishes is based on intertemporal references or anachronistic substitutions, a technique that infuses her version with humor, becomes a key to accessibility, but infuriates more conventional readers of Dante.

Finally, *The Comedy* thrives in intertextuality. Dante’s rich apparatus of quotations includes intellectuals, poets, kings, politicians, song-writers, and popes that Mary Jo Bang modernizes by substituting them with contemporary figures – John Coltrane and Amy Winehouse, Bob Dylan and Woody Allen, T.S. Eliot and Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath and the Addams Family, Confucius and Freud – that, in a moment of profound spiritual crisis, create a lively tapestry that needs to be read allegorically. References are made to Jell-O and Styrofoam; “Hotel California” by the Eagles and “Man of the World” by Fleetwood Mac are quoted in the poem, and in doing so not only does she pair high and low culture, but she also contemporizes Dante’s medieval state of affairs with its American counterpart: “The feuding families and corrupt clerics that kept medieval Italy in constant upheaval are identical to the partisan divisions that are fueling political deadlock and resentment in our time” (Tombasco n.d.).

One sly example comes from the much controversial and debated Canto XXI, when Dante and Virgil are about to access the eighth Circle of hell. Standing on a ridge and looking down at the pitch where hot tar is boiling, they observe a group of devils who are grabbing sinners, carrying them back and forth, and poking them with hooks and prongs:

“Tra’ ti avante, Alichino, e Calabrina”,  
Cominciò elli a dire, “e tu Cagnazzo;  
E Barbariccia guidi la decina.

“Come here, Killer Clown, and Ilse the Witch,”  
He began. “You too, Mad Dog;  
And Barbie, you be squad leader.

Libicocco vegn’ oltre e Dragagnazzo,  
Ciriatto sannuto e Graffiacane  
E Farfarello e Rubicante pazzo. (118-123)

Let’s have Qaddafi too, and Dragan Nikolic,  
Roadhog with his tusks, and Irma the Beast,  
Fubar, and Crazy Rummy. (Bang 2012, 201)

In a note, Mary Jo Bang explains that the names of the ten devils escorting Dante and Virgil in this Canto, are corruptions of names of Tuscan politicians and Dante’s enemies who banned him from his city (202). Contrary to most translators who keep the original Italian names, Bang decides for substitution. The allusions, however, are never arbitrary. For instance, in note 37, Bang explains that the devils are called Malebranche, “a combination of the word *male* (“evil”) and *branche* (“claws” – also “talons” or “clutches” or “jaws”), from which her choice to evoke the same pun with “Psycho-Clawz.” Alichino, possibly from acrobatic “harlequin,” the character of the *commedia dell’arte*, becomes Killer Clown, whose portrait (bold head, red nose, and exaggerated makeup) is reproduced by Henrik Drescher on the page margin. As we learn from her note, Bang alludes here to John Wayne Gacy, a serial killer from Chicago who, due to his profession, was also known as “killer clown.” Between 1972 and 1978 he assaulted and murdered at least thirty-three young boys and teenagers.

In the same line, we find Ilse the Witch, a war criminal whose real name was Ilse Koch while her nickname was “the Witch [or Bitch] of Buchenwald” (*Die Hexe von Buchenwald*). The wife of Nazi commandant Karl-Otto Koch, she worked as an overseer and became infamous for her cruelty epitomized by her collection of tattooed skin removed from the prisoners’ bodies. Klaus Barbie (who substitutes Barbariccia, the leader of the ten demons) is another emanation from the Nazi world. Nikolaus “Klaus” Barbie was the head of the Gestapo in Lyon and was so famous for his sadistic tortures that he earned the nickname “the Butcher of Lyon.”

In her meticulous notes, Bang offers significant biographical (and bibliographical) details that explain her choices: Qaddafi, for instance, replaces Libicocco who, in Dante’s text, “may gesture towards Lybia” (204); the brutal Dragan Nikolić, the Serbian commander of the Sušica detention camp at Vlasenica during the Bosnian War, impersonates Dragagnazzo (please, note the phonic similarities of the two names); Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld (“Crazy Rummy”), is Rubicante pazzo, possibly Pazzin’ de Pazzi of Florence at Dante’s time...

Mary Jo Bang’s operation may seem too eccentric and even impudent, but is not brand new in the long history of English translations of *The Comedy*. Even the ‘faithful and literal’ translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – whose objective was the accurate communication of the “diction of Dante” – we may come across references to the socio-political context of the American Civil War. His translation “refracts the world

of a war-torn nation divided by ‘traitors’” (Matthews 2012, 119). Moreover, if the translational process had a therapeutic function for Longfellow, whose second wife had recently died in very tragic circumstances, Mary Jo Bang proves the same familiarity with hell, having lost her only son.<sup>11</sup> Their opposite variations of Dante’s *Inferno* eventually come from the same grief.

## Conclusion

“Does Mary Jo Bang’s updated version of Dante’s *Inferno* work?” This is, in conclusion, the question that we need to ask to assess Mary Jo Bang’s endeavor. Mark Ford, who defines Bang’s translation as “ugly and boring and irritating,” has no doubts:

No, it doesn’t – No, in Thunder, it doesn’t, I can’t help adding, in emulation of Bang’s penchant for making use of inapposite quotes on all occasions. The numerous allusions Dante makes mean that reading the *Commedia* is inevitably a somewhat interrupted process for all but scholars of late-thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Italian history, since we find ourselves continually having to refer to the notes to work out who’s who. Bang’s version, however, introduces whole new strata of cross-referencing to a vast range of characters and events that postdate the poem. These gimmicky allusions to all and sundry seem crowbarred into her text mainly in the hope that they will make us admire her cleverness and audacity, and the breadth of her reading. (2012)

Bang postdates Dante’s poem by including a plethora of contemporary characters that speak of *our* agonizing world, but her “gimmicky” operation *does* make us “admire her cleverness, audacity, and breath of her reading.” Her work permits many (most?) contemporary readers to have access to a fourteenth-century poem when poetry is basically considered chutzpa. A second question could be: has Dante found a better niche in the twenty-first century? With the advent of the internet, emails, WhatsApp, social media and all the other ‘devilish contraptions’ of our time, how can a ‘classic’ translation of a ‘classic’ poem like *The Divine Comedy* accommodate the new needs of ‘non-readers’? Could ‘poetry influencers’ be the answer?

If there is one thing that I believe Bang’s *Inferno* does is to prove that, far from being a binary activity between two languages, translation is a very transformative and creative act, it “ensures the regeneration of texts, the means through which ideas can be exchanged, and the processes by which languages evolve and grow.... Further, translation reaffirms such fundamental values as cultural diversity and individual

---

<sup>11</sup> Frances Appleton died in 1861 after an ember from the fireplace caught her dress on fire. See the obituary on *The New York Times*, 12 July 1861. <https://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/12/archives/the-death-of-mrs-longfellow.html>. Mary Jo Bang’s son, Michael, died in 2004 from prescription drugs overdose. *Elegy* (2007), her fifth collection of poems, is dedicated to him.

creativity" (Gentzler 2017, 231), all values that Mary Jo Bang's translation transmits: a missile for capturing Dante's many futures in a post-translation age.

## REFERENCES

- BANG, M.J. (trans.). 2012. *Dante Alighieri. Inferno*. Minneapolis: Greywolf Press.
- BASSNETT, S. 2017. "Foreword." In E. Gentzler. *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*, viii-x. New York: Routledge.
- . 2018. "Refashioning Dante's Divine Comedy in the Twenty-First Century." In J. Blakesley (ed.). *Sociologies of Poetry Translation: Emerging Perspectives*, 69-82. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- BASSNETT, S., LEFEVERE, A. 2000. "Introduction: Proust's Grandmother and the Thousand and One Nights: The 'cultural turn' in Translation Studies." In S. Bassnett, A. Lefevere (eds.). *Translation, History and Culture*, 1-13. London: Routledge.
- BATTAGLIA RICCI, L. 2018. *Dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri*. Torino: Einaudi.
- BERGVALL, C. 2005. "Via (48 Dante Variations)." In *Figs*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing. First edition *Chain*, (Summer 2003), 10: 55-59. <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/bergvall-via.html>.
- BLAKSLEY, J. 2021. "Translating the classics." In *The Routledge Handbook of Translation*, 372-388. London: Routledge.
- BORIO, M. "Mary Jo Bang: 'Interpreto tutti i ruoli più il ruolo del pubblico alla prova generale'." *Nuovi argomenti* Lug 10, 2015. <<http://www.nuoviargomenti.net/poesie/interpreto-tutti-i-ruoli-piu-il-ruolo-del-pubblico-alla-prova-generale>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].
- CIARDI, J. 2001. "Translator's note." In *The Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, Trans. by J. Ciardi, ix-xi. New York: Signet Classics.
- FITZGERALD, A. 2013. "Mary Jo Bang with Adam Fitzgerald." *The Brooklyn Rail*. <<https://brooklynrail.org/2013/02/books/mary-jo-bang-with-adam-fitzgerald>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].
- GENTZLER, E. 2017. *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- HAWKINS, P.S., JACOFF, R. (eds.). 2001. *The Poets' Dante. Twentieth-Century Responses*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- JACKSON, K.D. 2010. "Transcrição/Transcreation. The Brazilian concrete poets and translation." In H. Tonkin, M.E. Frank (eds.). *The Translator as Mediator of Cultures*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- KING, A.D. 2013. "Outside Language, Looking In: Mary Jo Bang, Brandon Brown, K. Silem Mohammad, and Polly Duff Bresnick on Alternative/Radical Translation." December 19, 2013. <<https://kenyonreview.org/2013/12/outside-language-translation-interview/>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].
- LAZAR, Z. 2012. "Mary Jo Bang." *BOMB Magazine*. August 7. <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mary-jo-bang/>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].
- MANDELSTAM, O. 1991 [1933]. "Conversation about Dante." In *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, 397-451. Edited by J. G. Harris. London: Collins Harvin.
- MATTHEWS, J.S. 2012. "The American Alighieri: receptions of Dante in the United States, 1818-1867." PhD diss., University of Iowa. <<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.y2tcmnx9>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].

- NEERGARD, S., ARDUINI, S. 2011. "Translation: A New Paradigm." *Translation: A Transdisciplinary Journal*. Inaugural Issue: 8-17.
- OZICK, C. 1996. "A Translator's Monologue." *Metaphor & Memory. Essays*: 199-208. New York: Vintage International.
- PERLOFF, M. 2003 "The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall." *Jacket*, 23. August 2003. <<http://jacketmagazine.com/23/perlof-oulip.html>> [Accessed February 5, 2022].
- SMITH, T., SONZOGNI, M. (eds.). 2017. *To Hell and Back. An anthology of Dante's Inferno in English Translation (1782-2017)*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- TOMBASCO, N. n.d. "An Interview with Mary Jo Bang." *Southeast Review*. <<https://www.southeastreview.org/single-post/an-interview-with-mary-jo-bang>> [Accessed February 2, 2022].
- VENUTI, L. 1995. *The Translator Invisibility. A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.

# PERCORSI





FEDERICA COLUZZI

# DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND FEMINIST ARCHIVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN DANTE STUDIES

*(Re)discovering Female Authorship in Fin de Siècle Britain*

**ABSTRACT:** This article compares the vociferous Dantean archive of Dorothy L. Sayers with the deafening silence that swallowed up the first generation of British women *dantiste*, whose achievements lie dispersed across general collections and print archives. My documentary reconstruction counters these narrow representational politics by placing Sayers' experience within a longer historiographical perspective which recovers the role of Victorian foremothers as agents of production and mediation (interpretation, transmission, circulation, and popularisation) of Dante's critical and scholarly knowledge across different media, genres, and generations of readers at the turn of the twentieth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante studies, women intellectual history, archive studies, feminist historiography, nineteenth-century periodicals, translation.

## Framing female *dantismo* in *fin de siècle* Britain \*

The Oxford-born Dorothy L. Sayers was the first internationally recognized woman *dantista* of the modern era. In 1999, Sayers' biographer and close friend, Barbara Reynolds, recalled the "phenomenal results" (Reynolds 1999, 3) achieved by her *terza rima* translation of the *Divine Comedy*. With "50,000 copies" of *Inferno* (1949) sold at once, "Dante had become a best-seller" published in the "Penguin Classics, a series recently created for book-hungry post-war readers" (Reynolds 1993, 372). Despite discovering Dante in her fifties, Sayers spent the last two decades of her life writing articles and commentaries, delivering public and academic lectures on the poet and his oeuvre across Britain. These were soon collected in *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954) and *Further Papers on Dante* (1957): volumes that Cesare Foligno considered "unquestionably of far greater importance" than the "somewhat superficial little essay on

---

\*The research for this article has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust via the Early Career Research Fellowship [ECF-2020-512].

Dante by T. S. Eliot” (1958 in Reynolds, 217). Upturning the twentieth-century critical canon, Foligno demoted the 1929 essay that had opened the doors to the modernist reception of Dante in favor of her outstanding “clarity, perspicacity, boldness of comparison and fluency in exposition” and elucidation of Dante’s use of the allegory “(qualities usually conspicuously absent from writings of the kind)” (217).

Whilst Reynolds and Foligno celebrated Sayers for having brought “Dante within the reach of thousands of readers for whom he would otherwise have remained unintelligible” (Reynolds 1962, 9), such a popularising approach was frowned upon by “professional Dantists” (Reynolds 1958, 217). The Anglo-Italian academic community struggled to recognize her scholarly authority, remaining “prejudiced against the attempt of an author of detective novels to rank herself among them” and “naturally touchy and hostile towards all intruders” (217). Foligno’s comment exposes the cultural elitism and gender exclusivity that had been characterizing the field of Dante studies since the 1870s, when a *folta schiera* of ‘professional women “emerged as a group, simultaneously with their male counterparts” (Peterson 2009, 3).

Throughout the late Victorian period, women translators and commentators like Sayers were often belittled by periodical reviewers and scholars for the unrefined, almost far-fetched knowledge of Dante; the questionable scientific value of their textual, translational, or historical approaches; the ingenuity of their interpretations. Eighty years on and “despite the recent waves of democratization that had knocked down barriers based on class and gender” (Moulton 2019, 3), academic fields and highbrow culture were still “most resistant to female infiltration in the area of high-prestige non-fictional prose” (Mermin 1993, 96). The historical record consigned their experiences to the realm of amateur *dantofilia* arguing that these did not further the advancement of the “more careful school of criticism” and “annotation, based upon ample knowledge and the most careful attention to details” (Valgimigli 1921, 436) established by “men such as Henry Barlow, Edward Moore, Philip Wicksteed, and Paget Toynbee, who made a life’s work of Dante Studies” (Laurence 2011, 285).

Recent research in the history of women’s education and professional authorship has unearthed the gender disparity in the modes of instruction and acquisition of scholarly expertise (Purvis, 1991; Laurence et al. 2000; Pedersen 2017). Whereas Victorian men developed their knowledge of Dante through university study, peer exchange, and research infrastructures, women traditionally relied on self-designed programmes of reading carried out within the domestic sphere, through occasional perusal of subscription libraries and cycles of extramural lectures. While men secured academic positions dedicated to the study of Dante, women remained excluded from these career paths for many decades “continuing to face unequal opportunities, double legal standards and systematic discrimination” (Moulton, 3). As they “operated outside of the major institutions of scholarship” (Hannan 2014, 290), they relied on the financial

security and literary status derived from them being best-selling novelists, respected poets, prolific periodical contributors, and editors to pursue their Dante studies.

Much like women's history, the British tradition of Dante studies has been only recently turned into "a subject of historical reflection, narrativization and consciousness-raising" (Henderson 2013, 91). The paucity of historiographical endeavours, however, is an opportunity for (re)writing a more inclusive narrative that recognises to nineteenth and twentieth-century women the status of "co-makers" of Dante's reception as translators and commentators, editors and biographers, critics and scholars writing and reading across genres. The historiographic re(dis)covery of their experience can open new research pathways in reception studies by contextualizing the rise of British *dantismo* within broader transformations in women's education and professionalisation as well as in the mechanisms of discipline formation, where the figure of the *dantista* emerged "as a conceptual category" (Peterson, 3).

In this article I compare the vociferous Dantean archive of Dorothy L. Sayers with the deafening silence that swallowed up the work of the first generation of British women *dantiste*, whose achievements lie dispersed among the stacks of general collections and fragmented across the periodical print archive. My documentary reconstruction counters the common narrative which has canonised Sayers as a unicum in the history of British Dante studies in terms of gender and her democratising approach. It questions these narrow representational politics to demonstrate that Sayers was not the only woman, but the one who has remained most visible on the literary market as well as within the archive, where manuscript papers, printed books, and ephemera relating to the Florentine poet are preserved as a foundational part of her named, personal collection.

### The Vociferous Archive: Dorothy L. Sayer's *dantismo*

The material memory of Dorothy L. Sayers's life as a reader, translator, and commentator of Dante lays within the walls of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts college in the Chicago area. Sayers was one of the seven British Christian authors that the founder of the Centre, Clyde S. Kilby, envisioned as "part of the anticipated holdings" (Mitchell 1995, 13). Featured in the original 1965 proposal, Sayers was the only woman writer forming an otherwise-all-male 'school of thought' that included C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, Owen Barfield, Charles William who "shared Christian interests and wrote on Christian themes" (13).

The acquisition of Sayers' entire personal and professional archive took more than a decade, reaching a turning point in 1975 when Barbara Reynolds was invited to give a "lecture at Wheaton, on Sayers and Dante" (16). A generation younger, Reynolds was an

Italian and Dante scholar at the University of Cambridge. In 1946, she invited her to give a talk at the Summer School: a watershed event that ushered Sayers' career as a Dante lecturer, and her introduction to exclusive academic circles. Despite the significant age gap, the two women developed an intimate friendship and close scholarly partnership. Reynolds became her most trusted collaborator on all Dantean matters to the point that she completed the translation of *Paradiso* (1962) upon Sayers' sudden death in 1957. After her passing, Reynolds took on the task of monumentalizing her life by working as a biographer, editor of her correspondence and adviser to the Wade Center.

Mostly produced over the last fifteen years of her life, the archival materials relating to Dante constitute a large portion of the contents of the Dorothy L. Sayers Collections at Wade College. These range from diaries and letters to notebooks, annotated copies of Dante-books from her library collection, and cuttings of reviews and articles from the British press. The papers relating to her undergraduate degree in Medieval and Modern Languages at Somerville College (Oxford) record that she attended a Dante lecture by H. A. L. Fisher during her first term. It is the personal correspondence, however, that details most effectively material and emotional circumstances of Sayers' first encounter with the *materia dantesca* and the sophistication of her hermeneutical approach over the following decade.

The letters recount Sayers' serendipitous discovery of Dante through the mediation of Charles Williams, fellow novelist, literary critic, and theologian met in 1933. In 1943, he had published *The Figure of Beatrice* read out in virtue of their sincere friendship rather than of any remote interest in the Florentine poet or his muse. Much to her surprise, Williams' exposition intrigued her to the point that in summer of 1944 Sayers devoured the *Comedy* at the rhythm of (at least) five cantos a day. The 'fevered reading' was an intellectual and emotional *raptus* for which she admittedly "bolted my meals, neglected my sleep, work, and correspondence, drove my friends crazy" (in Reynolds 2005, 16). The awe and excitement for the unexpected turns of the story was mixed with the physical strain of "trumping up and down and round all these circles," "panting along with [her] tongue hanging out" (20, 18) as she followed Dante-pilgrim in his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise.

Early on Sayers felt the need to turn her solitary ecstatic immersion into a shared reading experience, persuading her friends, many of whom were women, "into having a go at the *Divine Comedy*" (62). For Marjorie Barber, she restaged the exact circumstances of her first bout at Dante. On Christmas day 1944, she gifted her Williams's book along with copies of *Inferno* and Laurence Binyon's *terza rima* translation, leaving "her to read while she herself [went] on with cooking the Christmas dinner" (62). The force-fed reading delivered the desired effect: Barber saw past the intimidatory greatness and monumental solemnity of his fame to recognize in Dante "the most incomparable storyteller who had ever set pen to paper" (19).

The archive records the growth of Sayers' epistolary community, which encompassed *dantofili* (Wilfrid Scott-Giles, Muriel St Clair, Helen Simpson) and *dantisti* (Williams, Reynolds). The new, Dante-centric network acted as "a forum for collaboration, support, critical feedback" (Moulton 10) and even book-lending along the lines of the all-female literary circle she had founded in Oxford, the Mutual Appreciation Society. With some correspondents, she shared doubts and questions, problems and solutions underlying the authorial construction of her interpretative and linguistic approach as she undertook the task of translating the *Commedia* in 1944. To others, she recounted the sense of excitement and fulfilment derived from her lecturing activity, occasionally asking advice on which subjects would be most suitable for diverse audiences she confronted, from first year students of Italian to adult students with no previous knowledge of Dante.

With many, Sayers opened up about the orchestrations that preceded the book publication, requiring her to "clear up the industrious printer's reader's innumerable marginal queries, verify all the notes and contrive a series of running heads" (Sayers, 360). A painstaking work undertaken with the meticulousness of the academic habit of mind combined with the disillusionment of the professional writer who had never "worked so hard for £75 down" and sincerely "hope[d] it makes something up in royalties!" (360). This intimate circle also included her publisher and editors at Penguins towards whom Sayers took a severe, authoritative stand instructing them on the precise page layout for the cantos, the notes, and the six-hundred and forty-entry long glossary to ensure the global "intelligibility" (306) of textual and paratextual elements. In September 1946, she wrote to E. V. Rieu that she did not "want most of the cantos to run out at 8 pages; I want to alter their "present state" to bring most of them down to 6 pages" while the notes were kept to an average of "about 500 words to the page" (267). In June 1947, she forbade the production manager from using single quotes arguing that "Dante is difficult enough already, without our conspiring to prevent people from seeing where dialogue ends and narrative begins" (306).

Throughout, the continuous contact and exchange fostered in Sayers a shift towards more critical and scholarly modes of readerly engagement. The first built on what Reynolds called "the *writer's eye*" (Reynolds 2005, 57) observant of the mechanisms of narrative tension and character construction at play in Dante's works. The other turned her "innocent, carefree personal letters about a great poet" (36) into sites of hermeneutical elaboration and scholarly collaboration. Between ten and twenty pages-long, in her *lettere-fiume* Sayers discussed Dante's use of the allegory, unravelled the intertextual relations that connected the *Comedy* to classical authors and Romance epics, commented textual *loci* and expounded philological and historical questions underlying his oeuvre. The epistles from 1944-46 voice her dissatisfaction with the translation and the exegetical apparatus of Dent's Temple Dante, the three-volume edition of the *Comedy* she had borrowed from her family library, likely belonging to her mother and

grandmother. Frustrated by Wicksteed's and Okey's linguistic choices, Sayers relied on her knowledge of French and Latin to make her way through the facing Italian text, annotating their pages, and integrating their reading with other editions, translations, and secondary sources.

Already in 1944, Sayers had begun building her own private Dante collection leaving "instructions with Mr. E. Seligman, dealer in rare books in Cecil 1 Court, off Charing Cross Road, to keep his eye open for any books about or in any way relevant to the *Commedia*" (Brabazon 1985, 234). In May 1945, she had found a "nice man at Zwemmer's" who "with really surprising speed produced not only the *Vita* [*nuova* and *Canzoniere*, sic] but also the *Convivio* and the *Latin Works*," thus completing her Temple Dante. These purchases allowed her to "extend my studies to cover the *De Eloquentia*, the *De Monarchia*, and the Letters" (*Letters*, 145). More recently, the Wade Center acquired a representative selection of Sayers library, including Giambattista Pasquali's *Opere minori* (1741) and *Commedia* (1751); Leonardo Ciardetti's six-volume edition of Dante's *Opere*, and a copy of *Commento alla Divina commedia d'anonimo fiorentino del secolo XIV* edited by Pietro Fanfani. Secondary sources range from Ozanam's *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle* (1869), Edward Moore's *Contributions to the Textual Criticism of the Commedia* (1889) to Karl Vossler's *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and his Times* (1929) and a subscription to the journal of the Societa Dantesca Italiana, *Studi Danteschi*. The material examination of these works show how Sayers anchored her writerly responses directly onto the page of her Dante books. From single and double lines to asterix and crosses, these *marginalia* inscribed her extemporaneous reactions of notice, doubt and of particular *loci* directly onto the page of her Dante books; singling out words, full verses, and groups of *terzine* "to be mentally registered and guarantee further attention on later reading" (Jackson, 2005); establishing an intertextual dialogue with the Dantean text through interlinear glosses, lateral comments, summaries and extra-textual references to secondary sources.

Within the archive, however, the Dantean manuscript evidence extends beyond the margins and endpapers to fill the pages of, at least, nine notebooks kept between 1947 and 1957. Running parallel to her lively scholarly correspondence, the notebooks convey the unfiltered account of her fulminous development from common reader to best-selling Dante translator and in-demand lecturer. The lined pages register the intensification of the readerly activity as it acquired greater purposefulness in Sayers' mind as she decided to take on her "theological and educational mission" of translating and commenting on the *Comedy* "as helpfully as possible to the many who want to learn something about him" (Reynolds 2009, 373).

The notebooks are witnesses of Sayers' indefatigable attempts at isolating, extracting and transcribing passages; at questioning, absorbing, and re-contextualising scholarship to form her own hermeneutical discourse. The transcribed tercets and bouts at

translation show her mastering the Italian text to “bridge time and space and come back, not with a “crib” but with an English poem that people will read” (117). The lists of characters, quotes, and queries, the comparisons of themes all form the mould of the apparatus criticus designed to cater for the needs of ‘most Penguin readers’: a public who she expected to be “very ignorant about the Middle Ages in Italy,” “lacking in literary background” with “no Catholic theology, no history, no classic mythology” (Sayers, *Letters*, 197).

The published outputs of her endeavours in Dante translations and lecturing are part of the general collection of the Wheaton College library in multiple copies and editions. The archive came in possession of a large folder containing two lists V.I.P.s and people receiving personal copies of the *Hell* and of an unspecified Dante, along a pile of press-cuttings relating to her Dantean publications. It is likely that Sayers kept these clippings to exert bibliographical control over the reception and dissemination of her work across general and specialised; metropolitan and provincial; working-class or religious reading communities in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Despite the lack of overall organisation, the corpus of excerpted witnesses materialises the most ephemeral aspect of Sayers’ work.

Between 1947 and 1957 her popular *dantismo* attracted the interest of critics writing in leading national newspapers (*The Manchester Guardian*, *The Times*, *Irish Times*, and *the Irish Independent*), exalting the canon-making quality of her work and the accessibility of her edition. Features that appealed also to reviewers and readers of local and regional press alike, including *The Evening Sentinel*, *Northern Echo*, and the *Manchester Evening News* in England; *The Scotsman* and *Ayrshire Post* in Scotland. Along with them, Sayers kept cuttings from high-culture periodicals, including the *Dublin Review*, *The Bookseller*, and the *Poetry Review*; as well as popular literary magazines like *Times and Tide* and *John O’London’s Weekly*, which variously commended the aesthetic sensibility and scholarly quality of her Dantean works. In the *Times Literary Supplement* one reviewer praised her “familiar handling of this mighty masterpiece” through “her fluid, racy and unanxious verse” as unparalleled in winning “for Dante the sincere interest of fresh exploring minds” (TLS, 1950, 224). Anglican and Catholic newspapers (*Church Times* and *Church of England*; *Catholic Herald* and *Catholic Times*) praised Sayers’ ability in elucidating the complex theological discourse at the heart of the poem, and to revivify the ethical and spiritual message for the modern public.

Extensive and diverse, the array of press-cuttings includes only limited traces of the academic reception of her works. Of the many reviews published in academic journals such as *Italica and Comparative Literature*, *The Modern Language Review*, Sayers kept only the one published in the *Cambridge Review*. Similarly, while she archived her own responses to and correspondence with periodical reviewers, she did not save her own academic articles for the *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, an archival absence that speaks

of the persisting conflictual relationship with academia. Sayers might have found the words of the American *dantista*, Charles Singleton, hurtful as they deemed her translation “a failure—no worse, perhaps, than a number of others in English, but quite as bad” (1950, 394). But one wonders if she appreciated the historical significance of Edward Williamson’s observation in the *Modern Language Review*, which identified “the value” of her *Penguin Dante* in “the splendid frame of scholarship” (1951, 201) that surrounded the less accomplished *terza rima* translation. This gave not only “permanent form to the excellent understanding of the *Commedia* which she displayed in her lectures” (200) but was destined to become a universally “indispensable supplement” (202) to any English edition of the poem. Over the years, academic reviewers and general critics echoed Williamson’s comment and sealed Sayers’ transatlantic fame as a competent, insightful, and innovative interpreter of Dante.

These very reception dynamics are most significant when contextualised within the broader dimension of women’s literary history, where they mark a major turning point. The fact that the critical consensus was (almost) univocally directed to the hermeneutical apparatus developed on the page and in the classroom fashioned her authority as a professional *dantista*. The preference accorded to the commentary work over the translation broke with the gendered limitations and the subaltern positions of women in the literary professions to men. Sayers was the ultimate proof that twentieth-century women writers could reach beyond the constrictive realm of translational and editorial work, and gain recognition and visibility as public figures of higher intellectual and academic status. Among the first to proudly claim her university “education” as a “source of authority for claims to scholarship” (Bellamy *et al.* 2000, 9). In a letter to E. V. Rieu at Penguins, she asserted:

If I have not long been a Dantist, I am at least a Romance linguist and, to some extent, a mediaevalist. I was a scholar of my college, I am a Master in my university; I took First Class Honours and was, after all, a scholar, and a poet before I was anything else (Reynolds, 45).

Studying, writing, and publishing throughout the mid-1940s and 1950s, Sayers’ *middlebrow dantismo* was the product of more systematic reflection on “the relationship between high art and popular culture, and between elite intellectual ideas and ordinary life” (Moulton, 5) that she had been upholding since her early days of the Mutual Appreciation Society. Her “desperate urge to make Dante known” (Fitts 1955, 59) was part of a broader, long-standing commitment “to turn the mechanisms of mass culture into conduits for enlightenment” in the firm belief that “vibrant, organic culture only thrived in a society that thoroughly integrated its highest culture with the full range of its population” (Moulton, 6-7).

## The Fragmented Archive: Victorian *dantiste* in the Periodical Press

Sayers' approach to the reading and study of Dante can be seen as a more academic expression of the popular *dantismo* designed and practiced by her Victorian foremothers. In these cases, the terms 'popular' and 'middlebrow' as synonymous and non-pejorative labels reflect the broad interclass public reached by women's intellectually accessible and commercially affordable form of scholarship that effectively brought Dante outside elitist territories of study and reception.

Although, as Joan Bellamy observed, "women asserted that they wrote for a general audience and, in the process, denied any claim to high-flown status" to "find publishers and acceptance with both reviewers and readers" (Bellamy 2000, 10), many others engaged in an ambitious project of critical dissemination of Dantean knowledge. Like "most women's materials" (Hildebrand 1986, 7), the published works of this submerged galaxy of *dantiste* are found in the back stacks of general library collections across Britain, Ireland, and the US. Among these, the Dante Special Collection at the John Rylands Library in Manchester holds a conspicuous corpus of translations (abridged and complete), annotated, and illustrated editions, critical companions, biographies, handbooks, biographical and historical studies, and adaptations for children produced and published in the period between Dante Centenaries of 1865 and 1921. A corpus that grows exponentially in size and range when surveyed through the *Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue* (NSTC) bibliography and after considering works and articles written anonymously or under a male pseudonym.

Unlike Sayers', however, the archival evidence is scarce and fragmentary because the majority of these authors were middle-class women whose personal papers were not preserved. In most cases, their historiographical record is peritextual, consigned to the space of prefaces, introductions, and short biographical notes. The only exceptions are 'great women' such as Margaret Oliphant, whose scattered archives contain letters to her publishers; or from 'great families' like Maria Francesca Rossetti's whose famous siblings kept epistolary records documenting several phases in the composition of her companion, William Michael, and the transatlantic publishing afterlife of her work, Christina. The lapses in documentation can be integrated with the selected contents of a much broader archive, that of the British periodical press. Extending far beyond Sayers' single folder of clippings, the reviews in the print archive are now largely accessible via digital repositories like Gale Cengage's 19th Century UK Periodicals, British Library's British Newspapers 1800-1900, Pro-Quest's Historical Newspapers and British Periodicals.

A keyword search on any of these repositories unlocks a diverse landscape of short book notices, single-title, or bulk reviews of 'recent Dante literature'. Although freestanding articles on the poet's life and works became increasingly widespread in the

late Victorian periodical press, the book-review established itself as the main intermediary of critical discourse throughout the long Nineteenth century. These appeared regularly in daily, morning, and evening newspapers; literary reviews as well as religious and family, women, and leisure magazines. These permeated the market reaching multiple segments of the reading public with their diversity of format and price, geographies of production, and distribution.

From high-culture periodicals to popular magazines, reviewers were the first to grant public legitimisation and wide, miscellaneous readership to women's critical and scholarly endeavours on Dante. While the space of an article cannot allow for an exhaustive documentary inquiry, it can certainly survey the reception of the key-works that marked the evolutionary stages of the matrilineal lineage in nineteenth-century British Dante Studies and of which Dorothy L. Sayers was the most celebrated descendant.

Almost a century before the *Penguin Dante*, in 1862 the Scottish Claudia Hamilton Ramsay was “the first woman to make an English translation of any considerable portion of the *Divine Comedy*” (Cunningham) complemented with a self-enclosed corpus of notes at the end of each volume. Little is known of her life and education. The *Preface* reveals that she was well-travelled and had worked on her translation “during a long residence in the land of Dante, in the very scenes where he lived and wrote; beneath the shadow of Tuscan hills, on the shores of the Bay of Naples, among the ruins of Old Rome” (Ramsay 1962, vi). The long sojourns in the country made “the Italian tongue [...] as familiar to me as my own” and the frequentation with Anglo-Florentine intellectual circles had put her in contact with “the greatest Italian students of Dante”, from whom she received “advice” and encouragement “to publish this translation” (vi-viii). The *Preface* also conveys a clear declaration of method and demonstrates her awareness of the textual processes embedded within the act of translation. First, she defends her choice of “attempting the very difficult triple rhyme of the original” on the grounds that “the faithfulness of a translation consists, not merely in the sense, but likewise in the sound” (vi). She then criticises the “writing in blank verse” as an “easier task”: a comment that indirectly places her work in contrast to Henry F. Cary's epoch-making translation of the *Commedia*, *The Vision of Dante*, whose (re-)publication in 1818 had effectively brought Dante to the forefront of the poetic and interpretive discourse in British literary culture. A conflict that did not pass unnoticed: the critic in the *London Review* commended Ramsay's authorial “courage” for “grappling with [...] the arduous Italian terza rima” that “some translators, like Cary, have avoided” (1863, 653).

When the first two volumes came out in 1862, the *Glasgow Herald* celebrated her as “a thoroughly accomplished Italian scholar” whose “beautiful translation” preserved “the spirit and meaning of the original singularly well” (1862, 2). The *London Review* commented twice on the work in May and November 1863, following the publication of

*Paradiso*. Yet, in this case, the reviews were tinged with gendered condescension embedded in the adjectivation and the figurative language used to exalt the “degree of elegance” that made the translation more “lovely” and “prettier” than most (*LR* 1863, 653). Similarly, the *Atheneum* typified Ramsay’s enterprise as “loving labours” and her versification as “graceful” (1864, 333). Finally, an anonymous reviewer in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* condemned her translational approach as “too ladylike”, intrusive and manipulative for “she too often forgets that her business is to repeat her author’s own words; not to add to them or soften down their ruggedness” (1867, 741). In the first case, such gendered phraseology undermines the ‘highly complex literary activity’ (Basnett 2005, 89) involved in Ramsay’s act of translation by emphasising the aesthetic over the interpretative value. In the second, it quickly dismissed Ramsay’s intervention as an act of forced moralistic domestication without really exploring what Lesa Scholl calls the “cultural ideology” guiding her behaviour as “an interpretative medium” on “the competitive arena of authorship” (2011, 3). Blinded by their gendered stereotypical views, the *Blackwoods’* reviewer failed to recognise the greater historical significance of Ramsay’s work as the first British woman of her generation to enter “into an intimate” critical and linguistic “discourse” (3) with the Florentine medieval poet, which she successfully carried out on the bases on a self-taught knowledge of ancient and medieval literature and history, philosophy, and theology. Judging the value of the work for the here and now, the reviewer—later identified to be Julia Elizabeth Hassell, could not see the lengthier historical path pioneered by this Scottish writer. The example she set forth granted women like Elizabeth Sayers (1887), Catherine Hillard (1899), Caroline Potter (1894-1899), Frances De Mey (1902) among others, the possibility to fashion and assert their authorial identity as Dante translators.

Another model of female achievement was set forth by Maria Francesca Rossetti, the eldest and least known of the Rossetti family. Private letters and sketches of her more notorious siblings (William Michael, Dante Gabriel, and Christina) retrace how Rossetti turned Dante from plausible object of domestic recreation to subject of independent critical industry, winning professional and popular recognition in the literary marketplace all while resisting the forces of gendered marginalisation and patriarchal influence within the circle of her family *dantismo*. In 1871, Maria Francesca Rossetti published with Rivingtons her *A Shadow of Dante: being an Essay Towards Studying Himself, His World and His Pilgrimage*, one of the earliest examples of Dante-companion in English language. Acquired by two American publishers, the work circulated on both sides of the Atlantic where it was favourably reviewed in major periodicals. It reached its tenth edition in 1913, it relied on direct sales and, even more, on the advantageous path of book lending, being included in Mudies’ catalogue along with several other works of acknowledged merit and general interest.

In adopting the essay format for her Dantean intervention, Rossetti transgressed the Victorian conservative patriarchal provisions on the inappropriate employment of a form that exuded experience, wisdom, and contemplation, none of which fell within the province of women's expected behaviour. Long-before Sayers' commentaries and lectures-turned-essays, Rossetti's companion offered her public the tools for a critical and conscientious, serious, and systematic reading of Dante. It unfolded over eleven chapters adopting a narrative approach to criticism with the alternation of quoted text and commentary, all integrated with a compact paratext openly antithetic to "the glosses of commentators bound up with academic pedantry that often took for granted in the reader a certain amount of preliminary knowledge and interest" (Rossetti 1871, 4). As such, the companion was designed to serve as "an incitement and introduction for those who had never looked upon the substance, never tasted the entrancement of this Poet's music, never entered into the depths of this Philosopher's cogitations" (5).

The press positively welcomed Rossetti's work with reviews penned by authoritative *dantisti*. The comments, however, differed in the emphasis paid to her family heritage being the eldest daughter of Gabriele Rossetti, the Italian exile and renowned *dantista* and sister of the pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel, author of an epoch-breaking translation of the *Vita Nuova* (1861). In the *Athenaeum*, Henry Clark Barlow stressed the derivative nature of "Mrs. Rossetti's work" as the product of the family's "hereditary admiration" (1871, 586) undermining her critical acumen, scholarly knowledge, and independence of thought in the eyes of the high-culture weekly. Differently, the *Saturday Review* exalted "Miss Rossetti's" role as a "faithful guide and a lucid interpreter" responsible for a "book" that was "admirably adapted as an encouragement to those students who wish to obtain a preliminary survey of the land before they attempt to follow Dante through his long and arduous pilgrimage" (1871, 690-691). In the *Academy*, Frederick Tozer echoed the appreciation for her hermeneutical approach which provided an "uncommonly unitary" (1871, 551) outlook over the poem. Tensions with the patriarchal authority were ultimately resolved in the *North American Review*, where James Russell Lowell applauded Rossetti's cleverness in "interpreting Dante out of himself, a method in which Germany reigned undisputed", exalting the scholarly quality of the "comment" equally useful to Italian or English readers by providing to the former "many suggestive hints" and to the others "a travelling map in which the principal points and their connections are clearly set down" (1872, 148).

Riding Rossetti's wave of critical and commercial acclaim, in 1879 the Victorian novelist Margaret Oliphant compiled a portable compendium on *Dante* to inaugurate a new book series she created and edited for Blackwell: the *Foreign Classics for English Readers* after the moneymaking *Ancient Classics for English Readers*. Much like the Penguin Classics, the series sought to introduce "the great writers of Europe in a similar manner to the many readers who probably have a perfect acquaintance with their names,

without much knowledge of their works, or their place in the literature of the modern world” (Oliphant 1875, 3).

Like Rossetti’s companion, Oliphant opened with a biographical account, followed by a cantica-by-cantica analysis of the *Commedia* and a final survey of the “lesser-known works” which “though dear to the student”, had failed “to attract popular sympathy or interest such as the *Convivio*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *De Monarchia* and *Canzoniere*” (194). Reviewers in the *Academy* and *Athenaeum*, however, discerned between Rossetti’s and Oliphant’s popular *dantismo* arguing that the latter demonstrated “neither the carefulness nor grasp of the subject necessary to make it useful” and essentially lacked “the dignified learning of Miss Rossetti’s *A Shadow of Dante*” (1877, 31). On the opposite side of the spectrum, mid-culture periodicals like *The Examiner* hailed it as “one of the best works on Dante in English” (1877, 920); the *London Quarterly Review* praised the great “educational value” of the book sketching a “much clearer idea of Dante’s meaning and symbolism, as well as of his style and chief beauties, than they could have got from a long study of Cary” (1878, 516). Both agreed that despite the methodological and philological shortcomings of Oliphant as a self-made *dantista*, her work channelled to perfection the intellectual needs of the growing middle-class public who read Dante with no “zeal enough to study translations, nor learning enough to read pleasantly in a foreign tongue” (516).

Many women writers followed in Oliphant’s footsteps producing articles, thematic studies, handbooks, and guides “helpful to [the] comprehension and retention as well as enjoyment, of [Dante’s] work” (Shore 1886, v) such as Arabella Shore’s *Dante for Beginners* (1886), Rose E. Selfe, *How Dante Climbed the Mountain: Sunday Readings with the Children from the “Purgatorio”* (1887); *With Dante in “Paradiso”* (1900); and Alice M. Wyld, *The Dread Inferno: Notes for Beginners to the Study of Dante* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904).

By the last decades of the century, women’s interventions in Dante literature had grown exponentially in number and range of interest, with two versions of *Convivio*, published less than two years apart. The second was authored by Katherine Hillard and published in 1889 by Kegan Paul and Trench. Like Ramsay, the biographical record is consigned to the peritext detailing that Hillard was living in Rome at the time she began working on her translation. Although it is unclear how her choice landed on the *Convivio*, we know that she sought the assistance of “many friends in Rome” thanking Alessandro Costa, Italian orchestra director and composer, for “the patient revision of her translation” and James Sinclair Esq. for “his kindness in allowing me the use of his valuable library” (Hillard 1889, lxi).

The volume was a scholarly edition in its own right, with the annotated translation of the work framed in-between a quadripartite introduction that discussed ‘vexed questions’ on the compositional history of the *Convivio* combining the study of internal

references and historical evidence; on the structural organisation of the work and its foundational links to the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia*; she then intervened in the discussion that had dominated the Victorian criticism, “the historical or allegorical nature of Beatrice” (Hillard xxxix). The introduction concludes with a direct address “To The Student of Dante”, men and women alike with whom the translator shared “the course I have found advantageous” (lix) for becoming a proficient interpreter. The good command of the Italian language (possibly through ‘several years’ residence in Italy and intercourse with intelligent Italians) was essential for undertaking repeated bouts at “the three most important works of Dante several times” (lix). Hillard recommends the direct and unmediated encounter with the primary texts as quintessential for developing an independent critical understanding and appreciation. For Hillard, the shift from intensive to extensive reading modes involves the study of “the most important of the commentators” (lix) and gaining a general idea of the history and philosophy. To facilitate the retrieval of these sources, she appended a list of suggested editions, translations, and secondary sources in which canonical studies by Fraticelli and Witte, Scartazzini, Ozanam, and H. C. Barlow were recommended alongside recent publications including Maria Francesca Rossetti’s *A Shadow of Dante*.

Edward Moore—the foremost authority in British Dante studies of the time, founding president of the Oxford Dante Society, and editor of the *Oxford Dante*—reviewed Hillard’s translation for the *Academy* in April 1889. The lengthy piece “heartily welcome[d]”, “acknowledge[d] at once and unreservedly the excellence of this translation” for being “accurate, scholarly, and graceful in style” (1889, 264-65). Despite having refined her Dantean scholarship outside the academe, within intellectual circles and private libraries, Hillard had been altogether successful at dealing with “passages of much difficulty or obscurity” and constructing an effective commentary at once “careful and accurate, telling the reader in a short compass just what he wants to know” with “ample and most instructive,” “illustrative” (264) cross-references to the Comedy. In “the midst of much merit and general excellence,” Moore detected some points of friction within “the careful and valuable introduction of about sixty pages” and firmly critiqued her for entrusting her hermeneutical doubts to Giambattista Giuliani, “the most short-sighted and uncritical of the modern editors of Dante in the matter of textual criticism” rather than “trusting her own judgement or that of other commentators” (265).

This closing comment signals an opening towards the legitimation of Victorian women’s scholarly professionalism in the expanding field of Dante studies: a symbolic gesture of far-reaching resonance made by the foremost authority in the discipline from the pages of an authoritative high-culture periodical. Echoing Moore, the reviewer in the *Athenaeum* too defied Victorian gendered prejudices to acknowledge Hillard among the

“considerable number of students who [were] working at their Dante seriously” and her work as emblematic “symptom of progress in the ‘popularization’ of Dante” (1889, 754).

At this time, the reviewer could not anticipate how the phenomenon of popular/middlebrow *dantismo* would be transformed by women’s increased access to high and university education, the award of awarded degrees, the widening of professional careers beyond education and the “raft of legislation [that] transformed British women into citizens” (Moulton, 3) in the first half of the Twentieth century. As in broader women’s history, the success of Sayers translations and scholarship was made possible by “the victories won by the previous era of feminist activists” (Moulton, 3).

Entering the arena at the apex of her career as an acclaimed detective novelist and playwright, Dorothy L. Sayers upheld the legacy of the first generation of women *dantiste*, vindicating their *dantismo* as the expression of greater “literary or academic aspirations” rather than “the fulfilment of an enthusiasm” (Laurence, 285). The article demonstrates the role that the material conditions of women’s archives play in preserving the memory of these achievements. The reconciliation of the vociferous with the silent and fragmented archives enables us to place Sayers’ experience within the broader intergenerational development of Dante’s female public between the mid-Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. The longer historical perspective makes the continuities emerge in the way these writers “constructed their authorial identities self-consciously” (Peterson 4), negotiated their ideological and material status as professional public mediators of Dantean knowledge on the literary market, while challenging the gendered, non-inclusive principles upon which the male-centric canon had been traditionally built.

## REFERENCES

- ALIGHIERI, D. 1889. *Il Convito: The Banquet of Dante Alighieri*. Trans. by K. Hillard. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co.
- BASSNETT, S. 2005. "Translation, Gender and Otherness." *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 13/2: 83-90
- BELLAMY, J. 2000. *Women, Scholarship and Criticism c.1790-1900*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- BRABAZON, J. 1988. *Dorothy L Sayers: A Biography*. London: Gollancz.
- CLARKE, N. 2011. *The Rise and Fall of Women of Letters*. London: Random House.
- "Dante's *Divina Commedia*." 1864. *Athenaeum*. March 5: 333.
- "Dante Literature." 1889. *Athenaeum*. June 15: 753-55.
- FITTS, D. 1955. "An Urge to Make Dante Known: The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine." Trans. by D.L. Sayers. *New York Times* November: 59.
- "Foreign Classics for English Readers." *Examiner*. 1877. July 21: 920.
- . *Athenaeum*. 1877. July 28: 103-04.
- . Mrs. Oliphant (eds.). *The London Quarterly Review*, 1877, January: 516-17.
- JACKSON, H. M. 2008. *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- LAURENCE, A. 2011. "Exploiting Dante: Dante and his Women Popularisers, 1850-1910." In N. Havely. *Dante in the Nineteenth Century: Canonicity, Reception, Popularisation*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 281-301.
- "LITERATURE." 1862. *Glasgow Herald*, December 13: 2.
- LOWELL, J.R. 1872. "The Shadow of Dante, Being an Essay Towards Studying Himself, His World, and His Pilgrimage" by Maria Francesca Rossetti. *The North American Review*: 139-09.
- HANNAN, L. 2014. "Collaborative Scholarship on the Margins: An Epistolary Network." *Women's Writing* 21/3: 290-315.
- HASELL, J.E. 1867. "Dante in English Terza Rima." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*: 736-55.
- HENDERSON, M. 2013. "Archiving the Feminist Self: Reflections on the Personal Papers of Merle Thornton." *Archives and Manuscripts* 41/2: 91-104.
- HILDEBRAND, S. "Women's Collections Today." *Special Collections* 3/3-4: 198.
- MERMIN, D. 1993. *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- MITCHELL, C.W. 1995. "30th Anniversary of the Marion E. Wade Center." VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center* 12: 13-18.
- MOORE, E. 1889. "The Banquet (Il Convito) of Dante Alighieri." *Academy*, April 20: 264-65.
- MOULTON, M. 2019. *Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women*. London: Corsair.
- "Mrs. Ramsay's Dante." 1863. *London Review*, 14 November 1863: 653.
- OLIPHANT, M. 1875. *Dante*. Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons.
- PETERSON, L. H. 2009. *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- RAMSAY, C. 1862-63. *Dante's Divina Commedia. Translated into English, in the Metre and Triple Rhyme of the Original with Notes*. London: Tinsely Bros.
- REYNOLDS, B. 1962. "Foreword." In D. Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, 9-11. Trans. by D.L. Sayers, B. Reynolds. London: Penguin.
- . 1999. "Fifty Years On: Dorothy L. Sayers and Dante." *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center* 16: 3-6.
- . 2005. *The passionate intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers' encounter with Dante*. Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock.
- ROSSETTI, M.F. 1871. *A Shadow of Dante: Being an Essay towards Studying Himself, His World, and His Pilgrimage*. London: Rivingtons.
- SAYERS, D.L. 1998. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers. 1944-1950: A noble daring*. Vol. 3. B. Reynolds (eds.). Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society.
- SCHOLL, L. 2016. *Translation, Authorship and the Victorian Professional Woman: Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau and George Eliot*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- "A Shadow of Dante." 1871. *Saturday Review*. 25 November: 690-91.
- SINGLETON, C. 1950. "The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, I: Hell. Translated by Dorothy L. Sayers." *Speculum* 25/3: 394-5.
- SHORE, A. 1886. *Dante for Beginners: A Sketch of the Divina Commedia*. London: Chapman and Hall
- TOZER, F. 1871. "A Shadow of Dante: Being an Essay towards studying Himself, his World, and his Pilgrimage." By Maria Rossetti. *Academy*, December 15: 551-52.
- VALGIMIGLI, A. 1921. "Dante Studies in England." *Tablet*, 1 October: 435-36.
- WILLIAMSON, E. 1951. "Dante: The Divine Comedy, I: Hell. by Dorothy L. Sayers." *Modern Languages Notes* 66/3: 200-202.
- WADE CENTER, Dorothy L. Sayers Collection:  
<<https://archives.wheaton.edu/agents/people/2406>>



OMBRETTEA FRAU

# VAGLIAMI IL LUNGO STUDIO E IL GRANDE AMORE

*Valentine Giamatti's Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke College*

**ABSTRACT:** My paper focuses on Valentine Giamatti's collection of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* editions at Mount Holyoke College. The son of Italian immigrants, Giamatti (1911-1982) followed a path that was unusual in the Italian-American community at that time, graduating both from Yale (B.A.) and Harvard (Ph.D.). He joined the faculty at Mount Holyoke in 1940, at a very delicate moment in the USA-Italian political relations. Giamatti's collection of Dante editions originated from a wedding gift. Over the years it grew to include over two hundred volumes in many languages. It contains rare editions (including the first Florentine edition of the *Commedia* with drawings after Botticelli, and the first edition with the adjective 'Divina' in print) and curious ones (such as *L'Inferno di Topolino*). Seven centuries after Dante's death, the Giamatti collection is the perfect gateway for a reflection on his life, his collecting style, and on the immense relevance of Dante's poem in north-American culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante Collections, Divine Comedy, Giamatti, Toynbee, Fiske, Zahm, Mount Holyoke College, Italian-American Relations.

## Beginnings: Valentine John Giamatti<sup>1</sup>

Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore  
che mi ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.<sup>2</sup>

In his 1933 essay *Dante vivo*, Giovanni Papini famously wrote that “per intender pienamente Dante ci vuole un cattolico, un artista e un fiorentino” (Papini 1933, 14). Valentine John Giamatti (1911-1982) was not a Florentine; he was born in a working-class area of New Haven from Italian immigrant parents from the Benevento province (Proto 2020, xv).<sup>3</sup> As far as we know, he was also not a poet, but he devoted a great part of his life to the study, teaching, and collecting of the most famous poem in the Italian

<sup>1</sup> I wish to extend my special thanks to Deborah Richards and Leslie Fields, the current and former Head of Archives and Special Collections at Mount Holyoke College, and to archivist Micha Broadnax. This paper would not have been possible without their generous help and infinite patience.

<sup>2</sup> Giamatti chose these lines from *Inferno* I (83-84) for his bookplate.

<sup>3</sup> They were originally from San Lorenzello, and their name was Giammattei.

language: Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Finally, to Papini's first point, Giamatti's relationship with the Catholic church was problematic. According to Neil Proto, the author of an exhaustive biographical volume on Giamatti's eldest son – A. Bartlett 'Bart' Giamatti<sup>4</sup> – Valentine had been disappointed by the Church already as a very young man:

[Val Giamatti] didn't bring the formal practice of Catholicism into his marriage, only the cultural heritage that imbued the Italian immigrant experience that he'd come to know. His departure loosened Val to explore the writings of Dante and others who treated Christianity as related to life, choices, and values explored without the constraint of faith, with the Church and clergy as symbols, icons representative of something more than the Church defined. ... There also was the quintessential virtue of departure, closely connected to the values he had witnessed that became central to his life and, later, to his son's: fairness in dealing with people, openness in dealing with ideas. (53)

Valentine Giamatti's story is a success story. He moved from his modest Italian-American upbringing to Yale and Harvard;<sup>5</sup> he married a daughter of Massachusetts' upper class – Mary 'Peggy' Walton (1914-2006) – and had a distinguished academic career at the oldest institution of higher learning for women in the United States, Mount Holyoke College, founded by a visionary teacher and entrepreneur – Mary Lyon (1797-1849) – in 1837. At Mount Holyoke, "the Giamattis ... gave vent to a family definition of the public duty of the private life, borne foremost in experience and values, now nurtured and encouraged by the historical culture created by the college's founder" (Proto 2020, 103). Another Bart Giamatti biographer, Robert Moncreiff, wrote that Valentine

was a teacher first and foremost. His published output was slim: an introductory Italian grammar...; a visual rendering of the schematics of Dante's *Divine Comedy* entitled 'Panoramic Views of Dante's Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise'; a few translations. His family believes that the small quantity of written scholarship reflected a kind of writer's block in English, which he had begun to learn only when he was a young second-generation immigrant schoolboy in New Haven. Whatever the reason, his intellectual curiosity expressed itself in other ways. He was an ardent collector; of illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*...; of Etruscan pottery; of Roman coins. (6-7)

Eclipsed by his son's fame,<sup>6</sup> today Valentine Giamatti is not remembered for the words he wrote, but for the words he collected, for his Dante Collection, which he donated to Mount Holyoke College shortly after his retirement. In the following pages, I discuss Valentine Giamatti's life and collection in the wider context of Dante collections and Dante's fortune in the United States. I argue that it was partially through his collection that Giamatti, the son of immigrant parents, was able to promote Italian

<sup>4</sup> Bart Giamatti was an accomplished literary scholar, Yale University's first non-Anglo-Saxon President (1978-1986), and the seventh Commissioner of Major League Baseball.

<sup>5</sup> Proto talks at length about anti-Italian discrimination at Yale and at other Ivy League universities (61-76).

<sup>6</sup> And, in recent years, by his grandson, actor Paul Giamatti.

language and culture in north America and to be accepted into American academic and social circles.

### The Making of a Bibliophile

Similar to the British passion for Dante, the American fervor around the *Divina Commedia* is mostly a nineteenth century phenomenon. A history of Dante's popularity in the English-speaking world is beyond the scope of this paper but, to provide some context, we can outline a few relevant cases. In an article about Dante's popularity at Oxford, Diego Zancani stresses how, in England, interest around Dante was inspired, in part, by celebrated Italian exiles, in primis poet Ugo Foscolo and journalist and activist Giuseppe Mazzini: "If Dantism, before 1830 'bore a distinctly political character', later the emphasis may have become religious and nationalistic. Dante is seen as the poet of freedom, as much as the poet of love, but also as the poet of exile. And the Italian exiles in London were numerous in the nineteenth century" (Zancani 2013, 324). The American bibliophile Willard Fiske (1831-1904) would agree with Zancani. In Fiske's words:

exiles from Italy had given an impulse to the study of Dante in so many foreign regions – ..., Baretti, Boschini, Foscolo, Mazzini, Panizzi, Rossetti, Emiliani-Giudici and so many others in England, ... and Da Ponte and Botta in America. ... Equally worthy of remark did I find it that so many foreigners should have entered the service of Dante... (Fiske 1898-1900, XI)

Fiske also stressed how a writer's importance was often measured abroad:

Worldwide fame ... is decided by a man's standing outside of his own country, or what, in the case of the writer, is the same thing, beyond the limits of his own speech. ... In English there are twenty separate and distinct translations of the *Divine Comedy* ... one of which has appeared in more than thirty editions. I cannot find that those of the epics of Homer much exceed a baker's dozen... (VIII)

A few decades later, American scholar Robert Clements, among others, pointed out that both the Romantic movement and modern philology (which, according to Clements (248), was "the greatest advance in literary scholarship since humanism") were responsible for the interest around Dante's poetry in the Anglo-American world. It was the nineteenth century British and American renaissance that produced a great number of translations, commentaries, and a new enthusiastic passion for collecting. Clements first delivered his paper at Ravenna on 27 April 1965, on the occasion of Dante's seven hundredth birthday. In his talk, he also declared that "Dante came into his own in the nineteenth century. He was not only popular, he was influential" (249). Clements concluded: "Dante now holds an international passport. *Civis mundi*" (251).

The same year, Valentine Giamatti traveled to Italy to take part in the Dante celebrations. At that point, his collection was well-established and relatively, if only locally, well-known. Unsurprisingly, the Italian trip was also an opportunity to hunt for more books. In a letter from Florence's Pensione Pendini addressed to a member of Mount Holyoke's Press Bureau, Elizabeth Green, Giamatti wrote: "The illustrated D.C.s I am bringing back are beautiful editions. I can't wait to show them".<sup>7</sup> Giamatti's voyage, one of several sabbatical leaves during his thirty-three-years at the College, received a lot of attention in Massachusetts:

During the second semester of 1965, Mr. and Mrs. Giamatti attended the Dante celebrations in Florence, Italy. While there Mr. Giamatti was able to acquire many beautiful limited editions of the *Divine Comedy* which are now part of his collection. During the first semester of the present academic year some of these books were exhibited at the Smith College Museum of Art as well as at the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College. For five weeks during the second semester Mount Holyoke College Art Department held an exhibition of the Rauschenber (sic), Dali, and Lebrun prints and lithographs which Mr. Giamatti had purchased in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

Giamatti and his future wife Peggy Walton met in 1933 on their way to Italy aboard the Italian-built SS Rex (Proto 2020, XIII-XVII). By the summer of 1934, Valentine had traveled to many parts of Italy, and to France. It was during this eventful trip that he became familiar with the eighteenth-century Florence-born French aristocrat Louis de Cambray-Digny, a soldier and engineer who had been in friendly terms with, among others, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (Proto 2020, 79-83). Neil Proto argues that the unique mix of Italy, France and the United States that marked so much of de Cambray-Digny's life inspired Giamatti to make it the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard.<sup>9</sup>

Valentine and Peggy married in 1937. The seed for his Dante collection seems to have been planted already on their wedding day: "The newlyweds exchanged books as a wedding gift; ... her gift to him ... was a seventeenth-century Italian-language edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*" (Proto 2020, 86). Only three editions of the *Divine Comedy* were issued in the seventeenth century, one published in Vicenza in 1613, one in Venice in 1629, and one in Padova also in 1629 (Pirovano 2016, 23). To this day, the only volume in the collection that dates from the 1600s is an abridged copy of the "Compendio della Comedia di Dante Alighieri divisa in tre parti Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso per la filosofia

---

<sup>7</sup> Letter dated 19 May 1965. Valentine Giamatti Papers, LD 7092.8, Folder 3, Correspondence, 1945-65. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

<sup>8</sup> Valentine Giamatti, *Annual Report to the President*, 10 June 1966. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, Folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

<sup>9</sup> "[Giamatti's] Ph.D. dissertation, which blended European heroism and intellect into the cause of American freedom" (Proto 2020, 102). Also see on p. 82. Giamatti never published his research on de Cambray-Digny. He donated his dissertation manuscript and related documents to Mount Holyoke.

morale, ...”<sup>10</sup> We do not know if this is was the wedding gift, nevertheless it is a precious volume based on the two most popular commentaries of the sixteenth century, Cristoforo Landino’s and Alessandro Vellutello’s. Furthermore, this is not an edition but a commented prose summary of the poem published in Venice by Girolamo Albrizzi in 1696. Giamatti’s copy is almost identical to Paul de Colomb de Batines’ description: it contains three full page woodcuts which, according to Colomb de Batines, “sono copiate dall’edizione di Venezia, Marcolini 1544” (233),<sup>11</sup> which is also part of Giamatti’s collection.<sup>12</sup> In his own notes, Giamatti writes that Marcolini’s was “the first edition with Vellutello’s comment. The woodcuts are three full-page cuts at the beginning of each cantica and smaller cuts for each canto. Some of them are repeated. These illustrations are entirely different from those published in earlier editions with Landino’s comment.” (Giamatti 1957, 3). Recently, Donato Pirovano shed light on the great innovation of the 1544 Marcolini edition:

La struttura della *Nova esposizione della Commedia*, stampata in quarto, è molto limpida: .... Ogni cantica è preceduta da una descrizione topografica, ... basata su una ricostruzione minuziosa del viaggio dedotta dai versi della *Commedia*. Il commento vero e proprio è svolto canto per canto .... L’editore Marcolini seppe ben evidenziare questa impostazione esegetica utilizzando un carattere corsivo più grande per i versi di Dante e più piccolo per il commento. ... la *Nova esposizione* inaugurò una nuova fase di successo editoriale della *Commedia*, che durò una decina d’anni con ben nove edizioni. Tra queste un legame diretto con Vellutello è rappresentato dalle stampe lionesi di Guglielmo Rovillio ... (20-21)

A quick glance at Giamatti’s collection reveals the presence of three out of the total four French Rovillio editions (1551, 1571, and 1575), together with the first official French edition, the 1547 Jean de Tournes with Landino’s commentary. The latter, according to Pirovano,

È la prima edizione ufficiale della *Commedia* stampata in Francia, perché la stampa lionese di Balthasar de Gabiano e Barthelemy Troth, del 1502 circa, è una contraffazione della contemporanea aldina. Si tratta di edizione annotata alquanto curiosa, perché, mentre i canti dell’Inferno e del Paradiso prevedono brevi introduzioni e note marginali, il Purgatorio non ha alcun commento. Questa scelta singolare potrebbe rispondere a motivazioni di tipo religioso e autorizza a pensare che l’edizione sia stata prodotta in ambiente riformato dove si negava il Purgatorio. (21)

Most of the above-mentioned editions were early entries in Giamatti’s collection. Their presence in his library already in the 1950s is proof both of his enthusiasm for his

<sup>10</sup> For full references for Giamatti’s collection, see “The Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection” at Mount Holyoke College:

<https://lits.mtholyoke.edu/archives-special-collections/asc-research/rare-book-collection/dante-collection>. For information about “The Valentine Giamatti Lecture,” see

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/italian/giamatti-lecture>

<sup>11</sup> Publisher Francesco Marcolini (Forlì, XVI cent.-Venice, 1559).

<sup>12</sup> See Colomb de Batines 1845, 83.

collection, and of his careful planning behind it. In *Among the Gently Mad*, Nicholas Basbanes explains bibliophiles' habits in part with their strong desire "to having direct contact with ... these writers as human beings, to be able to feel, if only in a visceral sense, the bursts of energy that had flowed from their creative spirit onto paper" (53).<sup>13</sup> However, with writers like Dante and Shakespeare, collectors cannot obtain manuscripts in the authors' hand, but only books published after their death. In Dante's case, collectors covet the oldest editions, whether they are precious manuscripts, one of the known fifteen incunabula<sup>14</sup>, or one of the famed *cinquecentine*.<sup>15</sup> In Shakespeare's case, *ça va sans dire*, it is the 1623 folio edition:

As for the Shakespeare, I noted that in lieu of any known manuscript material ... much of what we have of his work derives from this printed book ... if you accept that in the case of Shakespeare, this is the most important book ever printed in the English language, then you can begin to understand how it is that someone with the means to buy such a book would not hesitate to spend whatever it takes to acquire it ..." (Basbanes 2003, 53-54)

## Giamatti at Mount Holyoke College: Promoting Italy through Dante

Throughout his life, Valentine Giamatti was unusually generous with his collection. Over the years, his books have been on show several times, at Mount Holyoke and beyond.<sup>16</sup> Giamatti was eager to share them with his community, and was often photographed at his South Hadley home, where he occasionally taught, surrounded by his *Commedia* editions and by his students, who used to refer to him affectionately as Mr. G.

For Valentine Giamatti Dante was much more than a research and teaching topic, and his collection was much more than a pastime. Dante's poem presented a means to establish a connection between the New England of his birth and the Italy of his family's

<sup>13</sup> The author is referring to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*.

<sup>14</sup> See the British Library's "Incunabula Short Title Catalog:"

<[https://data.cerl.org/istc/\\_search?query=divine+comedy&from=0](https://data.cerl.org/istc/_search?query=divine+comedy&from=0)>

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study of the *Commedia* incunabula, see Mecca 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Giamatti often lent his books for exhibitions to several local colleges, including Amherst, Smith, and Trinity Colleges. In 1978, the Mount Holyoke Art Museum organized a show called *Illustrated Dante Editions: 1481-1971. Selections from the Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection*. The show was held in the Art Museum's Print Room on 23 October-27 November, 1978. The Program's introduction offers some insights into Giamatti's collection: "In his sojourns [in Europe] in 1947-48 and again in 1954-55, during travels in Italy, France, Spain and England, he acquired many important illustrated works. He hastens to add that he also found some of his most important examples on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, from dealers who had been fortunate enough to find rare examples brought here during the nineteenth century. Finally, Professor Giamatti was able to buy several of the recent suites of illustrations while he was in Florence during the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth when these suites became available for the first and only time."

past. Giamatti understood that his passion for Dante could bring together the North-American social and economic superiority with a non-threatening, even envy-inducing, Italian culture in opposition with the struggles of the millions of (mostly) southern Italian immigrants – a group that white Americans barely tolerated.<sup>17</sup>

Giamatti was hired at Mount Holyoke in 1940, at a delicate time for Italian-American political relations. He was a self-declared anti-fascist and a strong defender of Italian reputation abroad.<sup>18</sup> Soon after his arrival at the university, he started planning for a *Sala Italiana*, a campus space where students and faculty could gather to discuss Italian literature and culture. The *Sala Italiana* took twenty years to realize. It opened in 1961, in what became the new quarters of the Italian Department, hosted in a space attached to Mount Holyoke's beautiful nineteenth century greenhouse.<sup>19</sup> The *Sala Italiana* was the result of a patient effort that exemplifies Giamatti's involvement with his students, with the university, and with the community beyond it. As an Italian professor, Giamatti had one objective in mind: promoting Italy, its language and its literature. His plans for the Italian Department and for the *Sala Italiana* went hand in hand with his career and his Dante collection, which came into being during the three decades he spent at Mount Holyoke. Giamatti's annual reports to the college President are rich with details about his teaching and his current and future projects. With the help of his wife Peggy, he organized several annual community events, including a fundraising fair to aid Florence after the flood of 1966, and annual fundraisers to benefit Italian war orphans. Dante was always present, in his teaching as well as in his community efforts.<sup>20</sup> In his 1945 annual report, he wrote:

<sup>17</sup> For Dante's enduring popularity in Italy and beyond, see, among (many) others, Keen 2019.

<sup>18</sup> In a 24 September 1943 article from the *Holyoke Daily Transcript*, we read: "Criticism of the Allied practice of continually urging the Italians not to fight and then branding them as cowards in news articles, in pictures and on the radio, was voiced by Prof. Valentine Giamatti, head of the Italian department at Mt. Holyoke college (sic), .... Prof. Giamatti, of American birth and Italian extraction, is a member of the American anti-Fascist society. ... He outlined Italian history showing that a long succession of foreign tyrants and broken promises makes the Italian of today cynical and uncertain as to which way he should turn in the present conflict in Italy."

<sup>19</sup> "The Department of Italian Language and Literature is happy to announce that the Italian Room is now a reality. It is situated in the south end of the Greenhouse .... It is furnished with Italian Renaissance furniture and the walls are adorned by two flags of the famous festival, the Palio of Siena, one of the two existing bronze masks on Enrico Caruso, and two student paintings inspired by the "Divine Comedy" of Dante. Various student sculptures also decorate the room. During the second semester of this year opera sessions were held once a week in the new room and were greatly enjoyed by those on campus who came to participate in the listening periods." Annual Report, May 1961, 1. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

<sup>20</sup> From Giamatti's 1946 Annual Report: "The Dante course in English numbered twenty-four this year and thirty-six are already enrolled for it for the coming one. A Dante club was formed the second semester and its constitution was approved by the faculty." (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

The hope of the Department to have an attractive *Sala Italiana* will someday be realized. ... already the Department has received three contributions – a table from the parents of a student, a large bronze bust of Dante from another, and an alabaster bust of the famous Italian Renaissance poetess, Vittoria Colonna ...

And four years later, in 1949: “Five additional pieces of Italian furniture have been acquired by the Department. It is hoped that some day they will have their proper setting in a *Sala Italiana*.” On 2 May 1947, the Mount Holyoke News published an article titled “Enthusiasm for Italian Makes ‘Sala Italiana’ Necessity. Mr Ham and Trustees Back Italian Department Members” where Mount Holyoke President Ham was quoted as saying that “any funds raised ‘would have many times their actual value in strengthening Italian’.” In 1952-53, the department received an anonymous gift of a thousand dollars to be used towards the *Sala Italiana*. Giamatti’s expanding Dante collection was a suitable medium to promote a certain ‘Italianness’ that was both accepted and desirable in American academic and social circles. Thanks to the (by then) well-established Dante myth in American culture, and through his collection, Giamatti built a solid Italian program, and created a successful Italian community in South Hadley.

Valentine Giamatti started promoting his Dante collection early on. In 1957, he compiled an annotated catalog of his illustrated editions. In his brief foreword he wrote:

This brochure represents a listing of the illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*, of illustrated books on Dante, and of photographs, original paintings, and music inspired by the poet to be found in my collection. I have not included in this listing the illustrated editions of the *Vita Nuova*, non-illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*, and non-illustrated editions of the latter in translation. Anyone interested in this material for exhibiting or research may contact me at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts.” (Giamatti 1957)

The 1957 catalog contains 107 editions of the *Divine Comedy*, dating between 1491<sup>21</sup> and 1956,<sup>22</sup> in various languages (English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Welsh, Portuguese, Greek, and Danish), together with eighty-two additional items (music, art, and other works by Dante). He accompanied most titles with brief annotations. More or less twenty years into his collection, Giamatti owned three incunabula (1491, 1493,<sup>23</sup> and 1497<sup>24</sup>); the already mentioned 1544 Marcolini edition; the miniature rare 1516

<sup>21</sup> “[La comedia] At end: Et Fine del commento di Christoforo Landino Fiorentino sopra la comedia di Danthe poeta excellentissimo. E impresso in Vinegia per Petro Cremonese dito Veronese: Adi xviii di novembrio. MCCCCLXXXI. Emendato per me maestro piero da fighino.” (Giamatti 1957, 1)

<sup>22</sup> “*La Divina Commedia* con commento di Giovanni Roatta e introduzione di Silvano Gratilli, with Emma Mazza’s illustrations, Torino SAIE, 1956.” (Giamatti 1957, 20)

<sup>23</sup> The Matteo Capcasa (Chodeca) edition with Landino’s commentary. Giamatti’s “copy has initials hand-painted in yellow, red, and light blue.” (“The Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection”)

<sup>24</sup> This is the Pietro di Giovanni de Quarengi edition, with Landino’s commentary. It is a reprint of the Capcasa 1493 edition.

Alessandro Paganini edition;<sup>25</sup> the 1529 Jacopo da Burgofranco per Lucantonio Giunta edition that includes a full-page portrait of Dante, “The first edition to have a good representation of Dante” (Giamatti 1957, 3); the 1564 Giovan Battista Sessa edition with Landino and Vellutello’s commentaries, the first one containing both. It includes a portrait of Dante “con gran naso.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, Giamatti had already acquired his favorite volume, the 1555 Ludovico Dolce edition published by Gabriele Giolito de Ferrari in Venice. Shortly before his death, Giamatti was quoted to be “particularly fond on the 1555 edition in which the word ‘Divina’ appeared for the first time as part of the title of what would henceforth be known as the *Divine Comedy*” (Mount Holyoke Choragos 1981, 12).

### The Giamatti Gift

Upon his retirement, in 1973, Giamatti donated his collection to the University. The official Deed of Gift is dated 2 January 1976. The nine-page list that was originally attached to the Gift was lost, but in 1992, Special Collections librarian Nancy Birkrem compiled a *Hand List to the Dante Collection of Mount Holyoke College Library*. While, in Birkrem’s own words, “Those who come to this list looking for full collations will be disappointed”, her list, expanded from Giamatti’s 1957 catalog, is a precious tool to understand how the collection grew during the following decades. According to Birkrem, Giamatti donated 263 editions of the *Divine Comedy* amid other objects such as art, critical works on Dante, photographs, a *Divine Comedy* postcard collection, and commemorative medals from the 1965 celebrations. Needless to say, the most important objects are the illustrated editions spanning several centuries in twenty-nine languages.<sup>27</sup> Never a book snob, Giamatti’s collection also includes inexpensive publications, such as *L’Inferno di Topolino*,<sup>28</sup> and a paperback copy protected by an *Inferno*-inspired crochet cover, the gift of one of his students in 1972. On 3 March 1976, Mount Holyoke President David Truman (1913-2003) wrote a thank you note to Giamatti saying that he was “proud and grateful to have the Giamatti Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke” and promised “before many more months go by we shall have completed our arrangements

<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Paganini (XV cent.-1538) (known for the mystery around his supposed publication of the *Koran* in Arabic) was clearly inspired by Manuzio’s revolutionary book-printing. His *Commedia* is not dated, but scholars have concluded that it was most probably printed in 1516. See Giamatti’s own comments (Giamatti 1957, 2). According to Luca Rivali (and others), there are two sets of this curious edition, one with Arabic and the other with Roman numerals, that could indicate different publication dates. Giamatti’s copy has Arabic numerals. (Rivali 2017, 351-354).

<sup>26</sup> Colomb de Batines 1845, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Finnish, French, Gaelic, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Korean, Latin, Japanese, Neapolitan, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Welsh.

<sup>28</sup> First published in *Topolino* 7-12, 1949-1950. Giamatti’s reprint is Milano, Mondadori, 1971.

to locate the Collection in a secure but accessible and appropriate place in the Library. It is a jewel in Mount Holyoke's crown ..."<sup>29</sup>

While we still do not know much about Valentine Giamatti's book dealers, and about the various routes most of his books took before arriving to him, we know that he acquired most of his books during his travels. Apart from the already mentioned 1965 letter, Mount Holyoke retained a message Giamatti wrote Elizabeth Green from Rome in 1954, where he unofficially announces his collection: "Life is very busy here in Rome. Besides studying I have enjoyed myself immensely rummaging in old book stores for illustrated *Divine Comedies* – of which I am making a collection. Thus far I have found several in Italy and three in France."<sup>30</sup> By the 1960s Giamatti had acquired numerous important pieces that included four precious incunabula: the 1481 first Florentine edition, the 1491 Cremonese edition, the 1493 Matteo Capcasa edition, and the 1497 Quarengi. His collection also included the 1578 Giovanbattista Sessa edited by Francesco da Sansovino (1521-1586).

### The 1481 Incunabulum

The crown jewel in Giamatti's collection is the ninth edition of the *Commedia*, the first Florentine edition by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna published in 1481 with illustrations after Sandro Botticelli (Furlong 2015, 92).<sup>31</sup> According to Willard Fiske, the strategist behind Cornell University's renowned Dante collection, this was also

the first edition – and indeed the first book – liberally illustrated with engravings executed on metal. Many of these remarkable earliest products of a new-born art were unfortunately planned to be inserted adhesively, after the printing of the text, so that hardly a copy of the edition is now to be found with a perfect series. (Fiske 1898-1900, XII)

<sup>29</sup> David Truman to Valentine Giamatti, letter dated 3 March 1976. (David B. Truman President Records, Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 13, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA). Special Collections were later moved to a designated space located off the main reading room, a space that some faculty and students affectionately called the "Dante room," given the prominence of the Dante Collection, which was visible to the public. In the early 1990s, they moved to their current location in Dwight Hall, where they can be consulted upon request.

<sup>30</sup> Letter dated 23 October 1954, Via Rubicone 42, Rome. Valentine Giamatti Papers, LD 7092.8 Folder 3, Correspondence, 1945-65. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

<sup>31</sup> "The *Comento di Christophoro Landino fiorentino sopra la Comedia di Danthe*, printed in Florence by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna and completed on 30 August 1481, as the colophon tells us, is a folio edition, printed on Royal paper imported from Fabriano, consisting of 372 leaves, and containing illustrations of episodes from the *Comedia* designed by Sandro Botticelli and engraved on copper-plates by Baccio Baldini." (Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500). The Printing revolution website has a copy of the original contract for this book.

Also according to Fiske, the rarity of this edition is “in the matter of its engravings, nineteen or twenty in number, of which the first two or three were printed with the text and the others, separately printed, inserted in spaces left for the purpose at the commencement of each canto. There are very few copies having all the engravings – not many, in fact which have more than two or three” (Fiske 1898-1900, XVIN.).

At the time, the tradition of illuminated copies of Dante’s poem was almost two centuries old. As Rachel Owen reminds us,

There are well over five hundred codices of the poem from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which contain some form of illumination. ... The earliest illustrated *Commedia* with a precise fate was produced in Florence in 1337 (Milan, Biblioteca dell’Archivio Storico Civico e Trivulziana, MS 1080). ... These illustrated copies from the early Trecento represent the beginning of a tradition of *Commedia* illumination, one which culminated in Botticelli’s designs for the poem, produced during the 1480s and 90s. (83)

The 1481 incunabulum remains a famous if not a rare edition, given that almost two hundred copies survive from the original print run of 1125.<sup>32</sup> Giamatti’s acquisition date is unknown, but it is certainly post-1957, as this volume is not present in his 1957 catalog. He acquired it from the collection of Dr. Charles Lemuel Nichols (1851-1929) in nearby Worcester.<sup>33</sup> Donato Pirovano wrote at length about the fanfare around this first Florentine publication:

Lo stampatore Nicolò di Lorenzo della Magna (dunque tedesco) licenzia una monumentale edizione della *Commedia* con un nuovo, ampio commento firmato da Cristoforo Landino, professore di retorica e poetica presso lo studio di Firenze. A distanza di nove anni dalle tre citate editiones principes, Dante viene per la prima volta stampato a Firenze, dopo che la geografia tipografica si era tenuta lontano dalla ‘gran villa’, descrivendo idealmente un arco che va da Milano a Venezia, tocca Mantova e Foligno e scende fino a Napoli. Per questo ingresso, o ritorno, del suo poeta, la signoria fiorentina non lesina spese e chiama all’impresa artefici illustri: Landino e Nicolò Tedesco appunto, ma anche, in posizione più defilata ma altrettanto importante, Marsilio Ficino e Sandro Botticelli, ciascuno chiamato a dare il proprio contributo. Più che evento tipografico è evento politico. ... La valenza pubblica di questa impresa editoriale è testimoniata dalla cerimonia cittadina che, ... fu organizzata a Firenze. ... Bastava poi compulsare le prime carte per cogliere questa dimensione politica: non il classico e familiare accessus ad auctorem, ma 14 capitoli che introducevano non tanto al poema, al suo autore, alla sua materia, quanto piuttosto alla città di Firenze, ... (18)

This edition established Landino’s commentary over other commentaries, a domination that will last for almost the entire sixteenth century; in Giamatti’s collection alone we find eight sixteenth-century editions with Landino’s commentary.

<sup>32</sup> According to the contract, “the print-run of the edition was to be 1125 copies” (Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500). A normal print run in the 1400s would have been of about 400 copies (Alma Wolf 2021, 3).

<sup>33</sup> As per Nichols’ book plate. Also see “Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500,” <https://data.cerl.org/mei/02141614>.

## Paget Toynbee, Willard Fiske and John Zahm's Dante Collections

The Oxford Dante Society started its meetings on 24 November 1876 (Zancani 2013, 326), the American one was “founded in 1881 through the leadership of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton, who in turn served as its first three presidents.”<sup>34</sup> Among the members of both societies there were scholars, translators, and bibliophiles whose collections are now, like Giamatti's, part of a university library. Although comparing Giamatti's Dante collection to all other Anglo-American ones would be too ambitious a project for the limited space at my disposal, in the last pages I would like to briefly acknowledge three collections – one British and two American – that have much in common with Giamatti's: a love for Dante, an unusual passion for collecting, and a clear pedagogical intent.<sup>35</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the influential English scholar and bibliophile Paget Toynbee (1855-1932) donated his Italian literature books (including several hundred editions of the *Divine Comedy*) to Oxford's Bodleian Library (Zancani 1998, 506).<sup>36</sup> His collection of *Divine Comedy* editions fits perfectly within the collecting trends of the Anglo-American world of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, from the magnificent Rylands' collection at the University of Manchester,<sup>37</sup> to Norton's collection at Harvard, Macauley's at the University of Pennsylvania, and the most

<sup>34</sup> “The Dante Society of America,” <https://www.dantesociety.org/about-society>.

<sup>35</sup> Natale Vacalebri recently pointed out that “L'enorme valore storico e culturale di queste raccolte risiedeva soprattutto nella volontà dei fondatori di raccogliere per le biblioteche della propria istituzione accademica anche quei volumi che, per le loro caratteristiche materiali, non incontravano i gusti dei bibliofili del tempo. Di fatto, ancor oggi, le collezioni dantesche delle università statunitensi possiedono non solo manoscritti e stampati esteticamente impeccabili, ..., ma anche manufatti ‘poveri’, in molti casi adornati da quelle postille e annotazioni manoscritte aborrite dai più raffinati collezionisti ottoneviceseschi ma che per gli studiosi odierni sono più preziose dei diamanti ...” (36).

<sup>36</sup> Toynbee was Secretary of the Oxford Dante Society between 1916 and 1928 and was elected Accademico della Crusca in 1918. (497) Also see p. 499 n.12.

<sup>37</sup> The Rylands collection is one of the best Dante collections outside of Italy. “The nucleus of this collection, including the rarest and most important early printed editions, comes from George John, 2nd Earl Spencer (1758-1834), acquired by Enriqueta Rylands in 1892 through her purchase of the Spencer collection. This includes all but one of the 15 incunable editions of the *Divina Commedia* (Naples, about 1478), but does offer all three 1472 editions. ... The bulk of the collection are 19th-century texts and commentaries. The majority of the critical works were collected by Count Giuseppe Lando Passerini (1858-1932), librarian of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence and renowned Dante scholar. His collection was purchased by Mrs Rylands in 1906.” (“Dante Alighieri Printed Works” <https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/special-collections/exploring/a-to-z/collection/?match=Dante+Alighieri+Printed+Works>). For a detailed description of this collection, see Speight 1961-62.

prominent pair, Willard Fiske's at Cornell and John Zahm's at the University of Notre Dame.

Diego Zancani studied Paget Toynbee's Oxford gift, which was, at least partially, driven by a pedagogical intent. According to Zancani, already a decade before his death, Toynbee explicitly talked about leaving his collection to the Bodleian Library "come parte di un piano per incoraggiare gli studi danteschi a Oxford" (Zancani 1998, 498-499). In a manner similar to the already mentioned President Truman's thank you note to Valentine Giamatti, the Bodleian wrote to Toynbee to assure him that "i libri verranno spostati nella sala più importante della Biblioteca, lo 'Auctarium', e saranno ben visibili, 'very conspicuous to every one who walks through the room'" (Zancani 1998, 502). Giamatti also followed his illustrious predecessor when he compiled his own catalog. Indeed, unlike Giamatti, Toynbee left several *quaderni* with plenty of details of his purchases, such as "l'anno e la località d'acquisto, il prezzo in lire sterline, franchi italiani o lire, franchi francesi e marchi tedeschi" (Zancani 1998, 505-506).

Fiske was "Cornell's first University Librarian, an outstanding linguist and an enthusiastic book collector. Fiske began collecting Dante almost inadvertently in April 1892 and initially had no intention of pursuing such an enterprise. He records that 'the charm of the chase got hold of me;' the rest is bibliographic history. The Dante Collection Fiske assembled between 1893 and 1896 was celebrated in its own time and, to this day, remains almost incomparable in America as a repository of Dante imprints."<sup>38</sup> Fiske's contemporary John Zahm (1851-1921) was "a priest and ambitious young vice-president of the university during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, had set out to assemble a Dante collection for Notre Dame on the principle that great universities are built on great libraries, and his corollary premise, that a great Catholic university should possess a great collection of the great Catholic poet" (Dupont 2009, 2).

Zahm assembled his collection quickly also thanks to a significant purchase from an Italian collector who found himself in dire straits, Giulio Acquaticci. Acquaticci's library included several hundred Dante editions that Zahm eventually purchased at a bargain price.<sup>39</sup> Towards the end of his life, after Notre Dame inaugurated a new library with "a special Dante room to house the collection" (Dupont 2001, 447), Zahm declared "his desire to see a Dante chair at the University" (447). It is clear from Zahm's words that he meant his collection to have a pedagogical function within the university and "that he intended his Dante collection to serve as the foundation of an academic program" (481).

Willard Fiske talks at length about the relative ease with which his collection came about, given what he refers to as

<sup>38</sup> <https://rare.library.cornell.edu/the-fiske-dante-collection/>.

<sup>39</sup> For the intriguing story of this purchase, and for other materials that shed light on Zahm's "underlying prejudice towards Italians," see Dupont 2001, 464. Also see pp. 459-472.

the comparative absence of rival collections. The interest awakened by the celebration in 1865 of the sixth centenary of Dante's birth led to the formation of various private Dante collections, and to liberal purchases of Dante books by public libraries. Since those festivities a quarter of a century had gone by, and ardent hunters after Dante book-treasures were few. As a consequence, the shelves devoted to Dante in the antiquarian book-shops were again full. (Fiske 1998-1900, XVII)

Fiske wrote about how his long stay in Italy helped him realize both Dante's greatness and the lack of Dante literature "heretofore accessible to the professors and students of Cornell" (Fiske 1998-1900, III). Clearly, these early American collections of *Divine Comedies* filled a large void. As Dupont reminds us, "It wasn't always so easy to get an Italian book when you wanted one. George Ticknor once complained prior to leaving for his first European trip in 1815, that he had ... 'made several attempts to read Dante, and found it not only difficult to get a copy, but impossible to get help in reading'" (Dupont 2009, 5). By the mid-twentieth century, "fifteenth century European books ... were no longer considered merely extravagant items reserved to a restricted circle of privileged experts and members of the elites" (Alma Wolf 2021, 8) but, rather, they were recognized as important pedagogical tools that should be part of American collections.

### Giamatti's Collection after the 1965 Dante Anniversary

Following his 1965 trip to Italy, Giamatti's collection grew substantially. At the time of writing, we do not have a precise listing of what he purchased, but the collection contains sixteen editions printed in 1965, including Rauschenberg's XXIV *Tavole per l'Inferno di Dante*<sup>40</sup>, signed by the artist and issued in just 250 copies, and a new issue, illustrated by several contemporary artists and printed on handmade paper, of the 1865 Tommaseo edition, which Giamatti also owned.<sup>41</sup> Finding rare editions and incunabula in the 1960s would have been challenging, especially during an important anniversary year. Dupont points out that already in the mid 1800s it had become hard to assemble a collection as comprehensive as the "Trivulzio family in Milan, which remains today the only collection that can claim to include copies of all sixteen (sic) incunabula editions of the Comedy" (Dupont 2001, 461). For complete collections, they would have had to be "started earlier" and "had greater wealth behind them" (461). In this light, Giamatti's collection, born only in the late 1930s, acquires a new importance.

When Giamatti retired, in 1973, and prepared his collection for Mount Holyoke, he owned four incunabula, seventeen *cinquecentine*, including the 1516 Paganini miniature edition that used to be part of Ukrainian-French bibliophile Horace de Landau's library.

<sup>40</sup> Milano: Marcorini 1965. Giamatti's copy is 82/250. The original drawings are in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>41</sup> *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri nel testo e nel commento di Niccolò Tommaseo*. Milano: Martello 1965. Giamatti's copy is 151/500.

Additionally, Giamatti owned *Divine Comedy* translations in twenty-nine languages; a rare edition illustrated by a woman, Sofia Giacomelli (1779-1819),<sup>42</sup> and several luxury editions illustrated by important artists, from Salvador Dalì (1963-1964), to Renato Guttuso (1970), to the already mentioned Rauschenberg. He also owned all relevant commentaries, and all early English translations, from Henry Francis Cary's elegant editions,<sup>43</sup> to Boyd's (1807) and Longfellow's (1867). A special volume for him must have been Clara Stillman Reed's translation, published in 1962 and inscribed "to Peggy and Val."<sup>44</sup> Stillman Reed (1879-1976) was a close friend of the Italian program at Mount Holyoke. In his reports, Giamatti often mentioned her visits and lectures.<sup>45</sup>

### Endings: Valentine and Bart

Looking carefully through the collection we discover a 1919 school edition published in Milan by Trevisini, the *Manuale dantesco per le scuole: vita e opere di Dante* that Valentine received as a birthday present from his sixteen-year-old son Bart. It is inscribed "To Babbo, on his Birthday, February 9, 1955, From Bart." It must have been a special present, from son to father.

In the early 1980s, Yale President Bart Giamatti was invited to edit a volume of essays by celebrated Dante scholars: *Dante in America. The First Two Centuries*. It contains well-known essays by, among others, Da Ponte, Longfellow, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Singleton, Bergin, Freccero, and Hollander. At the end of his concise introduction to the volume – written shortly after his father's death, in 1982 – Bart Giamatti wrote: "American culture has itself been an effort in translation; through its reaction to Dante, we can see a culture grappling with a concern crucial to itself, as it was to Dante, the timeless and deeply human problem of fashioning the 'parlar materno'" (XII). It was this challenge to translate, to understand, and to communicate that took so much of Valentine Giamatti's effort in life, and that, in death, his collection continues to promote. Significantly, the "parlar materno" was also at the center of Bart Giamatti's eulogy for his father, delivered at Mount Holyoke on 15 April 1982:

---

<sup>42</sup> Paris: Salmon 1813.

<sup>43</sup> Giamatti owned at least four Cary translations, some of them are not dated: Philadelphia, Altemus with Doré's illustrations (1880s?); two New York, Cassell copies also with Doré's illustrations. He also had Cary's first full (unillustrated) translation (London & New York, Frederick Warne & Co.).

<sup>44</sup> *Divine poem*, translated by Clara Stillman Reed, published in Wilbraham, Mass. and privately printed (Stinehour Press).

<sup>45</sup> Clara Stillman Reed graduated from another women's college, Vassar, in 1901. Her translation "may be considered something of a novelty. ... was not widely circulated, with only 300 copies printed. Yet it signals a refreshing new approach in Dante translation, to be adopted by just a select few translators after her. It is written in a pleasant novelistic narrative prose." (Smith and Sonzogni 2017, 46).

He was a great teacher for two reasons, I think: first, because of his passion for connecting ideas to the way we live our lives; and, second, because he found, as he inevitably would, the right, the appropriate, the precisely fitting poet to think about and to cherish and to talk about every day – Dante. Dante is the most exacting intellect in western literature, whose system and intellectual constructs are meant to be a criticism and a guide to everyday, ordinary, felt life. ... That poet and this teacher spent a man's lifetime together conversing in their 'parlar materno,' that mother tongue, doing what the poet said and the teacher knew must always be done – going finally beyond the words into deeds, going beyond the perfect text into our imperfect life and trying to make it better, or at least more interesting and worthwhile, for others.<sup>46</sup>

Bart Giamatti's eulogy describes a model teacher and citizen whose life was shaped by a poem that has become the symbol of an entire culture. Pressed by hardship, Valentine Giamatti's ancestors had to leave Italy, but through Dante's poetry he was able to develop his own 'Italianness.'

On the Mount Holyoke campus, in a secluded spot close to the location where the *Sala Italiana* used to be, there is a small granite bench.<sup>47</sup> It is known as "Babbo's Bench." Inscribed on the bench, there are three lines from *Purgatorio* XV:

The more on earth there are of loving hearts  
The more worth loving, and the more the love,  
Which, like a mirror, each to each imparts. (73-75)

"Babbo's Bench", with the fitting lines about love, was a retirement gift to Valentine Giamatti. For many years, it was in the garden of his son Dino's hotel in Maine. In 1987, Peggy Giamatti requested for it to be moved to the campus, "in the vicinity of Val's office where a multitude of students heard about *La Divina Commedia*."<sup>48</sup> Giamatti shared his love of Dante with his students and nourished them with it, teaching them "the delight of the free play of the mind among ideas that are stimulating and beautiful" to make their "living ... more pleasant and worthwhile."<sup>49</sup> His memory lives on through his collection.

<sup>46</sup> Eulogy for Valentine John Giamatti, April 15, 1982. LD7092.6, Italian Language and Literature Department, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

<sup>47</sup> On the Yale campus, there is a Giamatti Bench dedicated to Bart (Proto 2020, 265).

<sup>48</sup> "Giamatti Bench," President Elizabeth T. Kennan Papers, Box 9, Folder 19. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

<sup>49</sup> Valentine Giamatti, *Annual Report to the President* 1960. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, Folder 2. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

## REFERENCES

- ALMA WOLF, L. 2021. "Crossing Borders. The Library of Congress Dante Collections." In L. Alma Wolf (ed.), *The Unexpected Dante: Perspectives on the Divine Comedy*, 1-19. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- BASBANES, N. 2003. *Among the Gently Mad. Strategies and Perspectives for the Book Hunter in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- BIRKREM, N. 1992. *Hand List to the Dante Collection of Mount Holyoke College Library*. Northampton: Paradise Copies.
- BRITISH LIBRARY INCUNABULA SHORT TITLE CATALOG. Accessed January 27, 2022. [https://data.cerl.org/istc/\\_search?query=divine+comedy&from=0](https://data.cerl.org/istc/_search?query=divine+comedy&from=0)
- COLOMB DE BATINES, P. 1845. *Bibliografia Dantesca*. Prato: Tipografia Aldina Editrice.
- CLEMENTS, R. J. 1967. "Dante After Seven Centuries." In *American Critical Essays on The Divine Comedy*, edited by Robert J. Clements. New York: New York University Press.
- DANTE 1481. PRINTING REVOLUTION 1450-1500. FIFTY YEARS THAT CHANGED EUROPE. Accessed January 27, 2022. <https://www.printingrevolution.eu/dante-1481/>
- THE DANTE SOCIETY OF AMERICA. Accessed January 27, 2022. <https://www.dantesociety.org/about-society>.
- DUPONT, C. Y. 2001. "Collecting Dante in America at the End of the Nineteenth Century: John Zahm and Notre Dame." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 95, No. 4: 443-481.
- . 2009. "Collecting and Reading Dante in the Nineteenth Century and the Birth of Italian Studies in American Universities." Paper presented at *Cinquant'anni Casalini Libri: A North American Celebration*, Chicago, The Newberry Library, July 13, 2009. Accessed January 26, 2022. [https://www.academia.edu/4027268/Collecting\\_and\\_Reading\\_Dante\\_in\\_the\\_Nineteenth\\_Century\\_and\\_the\\_Birth\\_of\\_Italian\\_Studies\\_in\\_American\\_Universities](https://www.academia.edu/4027268/Collecting_and_Reading_Dante_in_the_Nineteenth_Century_and_the_Birth_of_Italian_Studies_in_American_Universities)
- FISKE, Willard. 1898-1900. "Introductory" to T. W. Koch (ed.), *Catalogue of the Dante Collection*, III-XVIII. Ithaca: University Press: III-XVIII.
- THE FISKE DANTE COLLECTION. Accessed January 26, 2022. <https://rare.library.cornell.edu/the-fiske-dante-collection/>
- FURLONG, G. 2015. "Fine early editions of Dante's *La Divina Commedia*. *Comento di Christoforo Landino Fiorentino sopra La Commedia di Dante Alighieri, Poeta Fiorentino*." In *Treasures from UCL*, 90-93. London: UCL Press.
- GIAMATTI, A.B. 1983. "Preface". In A. Bartlett Giamatti (ed.), *Dante in America: The First Two Centuries*, IX-XII. Binghamton: SUNY Press.
- GIAMATTI, V. 1957. *Dante Illustrated. A Listing of Illustrated Editions of the Divine Comedy and Illustrated Books on Dante*. South Hadley, Mass.
- "Giamatti Donates Dante Divina!", *The Mount Holyoke Choragos*, 16, 19, 10 December 1981: 12.
- JOHN RYLANDS RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND LIBRARY. Dante Alighieri Printed Works. Accessed January 27, 2022. <<https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/special-collections/exploring/a-to-z/collection/?match=Dante+Alighieri+Printed+Works>>
- KEEN, C. 2019. "Dante's Fortuna: An Overview of Canon Formation and National Contexts." In *Ethics, Politics and Justice in Dante*, edited by Giulia Gaimari, and Catherine Keen, 129-143. London: UCL Press.
- MECCA, A.E. 2010. "La tradizione a stampa della *Commedia*: gli incunaboli," *Nuova Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 13, 1-2: 33-77.
- MONCREIFF, R. 2008. *Bart Giamatti: a Profile*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- OWEN, R. 2007. "The Image of Dante, Poet and Pilgrim." In A. Braida, L. Calè (eds.), *Dante on View. The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, 83-94. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- PAPINI, G. 1933. *Dante vivo*. Florence: Libreria editrice fiorentina.

- PIROVANO, D. 2016. "Dante Alighieri. Dal Tempo all'Etterno." In G. Saccani, D. Pirovano (eds.), *Più Splendon le carte. Manoscritti, libri, documenti, biblioteche: Dante "dal tempo all'eterno"*, 11-25. Turin: Hapax.
- PROTO, N.T. 2020. *Fearless: A. Bartlett Giamatti and the Battle for Fairness in America*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- RIVALI, L. 2017. "Per il Dante in 24° di Alessandro Paganini (con uno sconosciuto esemplare in pergamena)," *La Bibliofilia*, 119, n. 3: 345-366.
- SMITH, T., SONZOGNI, M. 2017. *To Hell and Back: An anthology of Dante's Inferno in English Translation (1782-2017)*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- SPEIGHT, K. 1961-1962. "The John Rylands Library Dante Collection." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 44: 175-212.
- VACALEBRE, N. 2020. "Postillati danteschi tra bibliofilia e storia. Le Dante collections in America," *La biblioteca di via Senato Milano*, XII, n. 12: 35-40.
- THE VALENTINE GIAMATTI LECTURE, Mount Holyoke College. Accessed January 27, 2022. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/italian/giamatti-lecture>
- THE VALENTINE GIAMATTI DANTE COLLECTION, Mount Holyoke College. Accessed January 27, 2022. <https://lits.mtholyoke.edu/archives-special-collections/asc-research/rare-book-collection/dante-collection>.
- ZANCANI, D. 1998. "Una biblioteca di cent'anni fa: la 'Dante Collection' di Paget Toynbee." *La Bibliofilia*, 100, No. 2/3: 495-512.
- . 2013. "Notes on Dante Studies in Nineteenth Century Oxford." In "*Legato con amore in un volume.*" *Essays in Honor of John A. Scott*. Edited by John Kinder, and Diana Glenn, 321-332. Florence: Olschki.

LETTURE





GIAN MARIO ANSELMINI

## DANTE E LE NARRAZIONI

*A proposito di: CASADEI, A., MORACE, A., RUOZZI G. (eds.). 2021. Se tu segui tua stella, non puoi fallire. I grandi narratori raccontano il loro Dante. Milano: Rizzoli, pp.388.*

Tra il 2018 e il 2021 l'ADI (Associazione degli italianisti) ha organizzato, nonostante le difficoltà legate al dilagare del COVID (e proprio ancora durante l'anno centenario, il 2021) moltissime iniziative (spesso ovviamente in *streaming*) dedicate a Dante: dal responsabile ADI del "gruppo Dante" Alberto Casadei al Presidente e al Segretario ADI, Gino Ruozzi e Aldo Morace, fino a tutti gli iscritti vi è stata una mobilitazione inedita di forze intorno alle celebrazioni per il grande poeta che ha prodotto risultati di assoluta originalità, tanto più ammirevoli in quanto svolti in piena emergenza epidemica. Il tentativo, riuscito, è stato quello di leggere Dante a partire soprattutto dalle domande del presente e dello stesso nebuloso e drammatico futuro da cui siamo investigati e tormentati (oggi anche con una guerra in corso in piena Europa). Il Congresso dantesco stesso più generale svolto dall'ADI a Roma nell'aprile 2021 non casualmente era dedicato alla ricezione di Dante e alla sua ricezione oltre i confini italiani per cogliere la sua presenza in Europa e nel mondo moderno dal Settecento ad oggi. Convegno di alto livello e di forte tensione civile così come impressa dal bellissimo intervento del Premio Nobel africano Wole Soyinka. Non solo Soyinka: in realtà molti scrittori italiani e stranieri intervennero, grazie all'ADI, in quei tre anni nelle tante iniziative tenutesi in tutta Italia e in molti luoghi (con le Scuole spesso protagoniste fra l'altro accanto alle Università e alle città) e sempre con letture e suggestioni dantesche di caratura straordinaria e partecipe. Nel libro che qui segnaliamo sono appunto raccolti più di venti contributi di scrittori italiani e stranieri di primissimo piano che hanno accettato con immediato entusiasmo di dare forma scritta a quei loro interventi e conferenze. Ne è nato un volume che è un affresco di straordinaria portata sul Dante di "oggi" narrato da scrittori e consegnato in veste nuova e spesso "inedita" e suggestiva ai lettori contemporanei. Del resto, nel cuore della pandemia lungo il 2020, il "New York Times Magazine" aveva "riscoperto" il *Decameron* di Boccaccio e aveva dato vita a un esperimento davvero originale e di assoluto rilievo: si decise di ispirarsi ai giovani della brigata boccacciana che, in fuga dalla peste che infuriava a Firenze, avevano concordato, ritirati in luogo ameno fuori città, di raccontare fra loro novelle che dessero conto di una "narrazione" capace di sfidare la morte e il clima opprimente della devastante epidemia. Sicché il *Magazine* chiese a ventinove narratori soprattutto americani ma anche di vari altri paesi (per l'Italia Paolo Giordano), e ispirandosi dichiaratamente al *Decameron*, di

scrivere brevi racconti mentre erano in pieno *lockdown* e chiusi nelle loro dimore. Ne nacque un libro di grande interesse e di significato molto potente: i grandi classici della letteratura italiana (in quel caso Boccaccio appunto) divenivano infatti nostri “contemporanei” nel Mondo, suggerivano piste e “cure” (Ed.ital., *Decameron Project*, a cura degli *editor* del “New York Times Magazine”, Enne Enne Editore, Milano, 2021).

Una portata ancor più ampia hanno ovviamente rivestito in tutto il mondo le “scritture” dantesche di cui il volume che qui recensiamo è testimone esemplare. Emerge, dalle voci degli scrittori scesi in campo, molto potente, la fisionomia di Dante che domina oggi nell’immaginario: è soprattutto il Dante “infernale” e il Dante inteso nella sua “lettera” ovvero nel fascino che il Dante narratore di una inimmaginabile avventura oltremondana sa comunicare di là da ogni accademica allegoresi possibile. La distanza con la puntigliosa e infinita esegesi della critica dantesca che ha indagato, commentato e sezionato fin nei meandri più riposti la *Commedia* è radicale: gli scrittori, pur attentissimi a una lettura profonda e non banale del testo dantesco, ci restituiscono un Dante certo più vicino ai lettori contemporanei non specialisti; e in questo senso il volume davvero può far accostare nuovi lettori a Dante scrostando dalla sua immagine le logore formule scolastiche con cui è stato spesso vissuto: esemplare in tal senso la testimonianza per la Francia di Yannick Haenel che solo dopo aver incrociato la bellissima traduzione della *Commedia* della Risset e, via Hugo, le straordinarie pagine dantesche di Sollers ha potuto ritrovare il “suo” Dante, per altro ignorato dai programmi scolastici francesi o banalizzato in logore formulette. Ovviamente è diversa la testimonianza degli scrittori italiani che, *nonostante* la scuola, hanno sempre avuto un approccio entusiasta verso Dante e le sue suggestioni “infernali”: il saggio di forte impatto emotivo di Nicola Lagioia ci conduce alle “radici del male” attraverso un efferato fatto di cronaca (quasi un ritorno di *A sangue freddo* di Truman Capote) rivisitato alla luce dell’*Inferno* dantesco e del suo “orrore”. È un “tono” dantesco e infernale che troviamo oggi nelle cronache su “Robinson” del processo a Parigi per la efferata strage del Bataclan da parte di Emmanuel Carrère o nell’angosciante galleria “degli inferi” del recentissimo libro di Simone Sauza, *Tutto era cenere. Sull’uccidere seriale* (nottetempo editore, Milano, 2022). E non a caso, nel volume qui presentato, Maurizio De Giovanni, il noto autore di *crime* di grande successo, ci intriga lavorando su un terreno simile a quello di Lagioia ovvero sull’incrocio tra Dante e certi sentieri del *noir* contemporaneo (su cui anch’io ero intervenuto, con un allargamento all’*horror*, in “Griseldaonline”, 23 marzo 2021). È interessante poi notare come giustamente vari contributi degli scrittori si soffermino sulla “selva oscura”, prima immagine inquietante della *Commedia* letta, più che in chiave allegorica strettamente intesa, piuttosto come ingresso nel Male, nelle paure, nel mistero di un viaggio che appare anche un sogno/incubo esattamente come ogni foresta buia e misteriosa agita tanti percorsi della narrativa moderna in senso lato (soprattutto cinematografica): esemplari i saggi di Piperno, di Siti e di vari altri. L’oscurità continua e lacerante dell’*Inferno* attrae per il girone della “pece bollente” (Albinati), pece che richiama però anche i laboriosi arsenali dei veneziani dove si costruiscono e riparano imbarcazioni, paragone memorabile con cui Dante apre *Inferno* XXI e che con originalissima lettura Giuseppe

Lupo interpreta come uno dei primi esempi di minuta descrizione di una attività di officina moderna e preindustriale. Ma è il bellissimo intervento del premio Nobel Soyinka in chiusura del volume che ci riporta, attraverso il dolente richiamo ai terribili e feroci scenari di guerre, massacri e torture dell’Africa moderna, all’inevitabile ricorso all’*Inferno* dantesco come chiave ineludibile per accedere alle radici di quel male che ha lesa e ferito un intero continente: addirittura Soyinka a questo proposito e fin dal titolo del suo intervento, conia una sorta di neologismo, “infernofilia”, quasi a rimarcare il sigillo con cui noi siamo costretti ad avvalerci della cantica dantesca per aiutarci a capire tutto il peso inesplicabile e arbitrario del Male. Ovviamente non è solo l’*Inferno* ad attraversare il volume: vari saggi propongono letture molto attente delle situazioni, della lingua e dei personaggi della *Commedia* ma sempre in quell’ottica del “Dante narratore” spesso solo lambita dai dantisti di professione e invece così cara agli scrittori: qui basti ricordare i saggi introduttivi di Marilynne Robinson, di Sybille Lewitscheroff e soprattutto il bellissimo e commosso saggio (una sorta di interpretazione/racconto) di Melania Mazzucco. La stessa aura “malinconica” che permea il *Purgatorio* echeggia in molti saggi mentre, singolarmente, l’intento finale d’amore e il grande innamoramento per la salvifica Beatrice non occupano quello spazio che ci aspetteremmo (su Beatrice intervenne a suo tempo invece nel 2021 dalle colonne di “Robinson” e al Congresso dell’ADI, con pagine di esemplare lucidità, Elena Ferrante). È come se il clima distopico in cui viviamo angosciati ormai su scala planetaria ci impedisse di “sognare” davvero l’Amore e il suo possibile Paradiso. Ma due saggi però “riscattano” in modo magistrale su questo terreno il volume: sono i saggi di Marcello Fois (sul *concept* della *Vita nova*, di straordinario acume e originalità, vero grimaldello per portare il lettore contemporaneo ad avvicinarsi anche a questo testo di Dante e all’autobiografia magnifica del suo “innamoramento per sempre”) e quello di Alessandra Sarchi che muove proprio dalla centralità di Amore come fine ultimo non solo dell’ispirazione dantesca ma della stessa esistenza di Dante. Non basterebbero insomma qui le pagine per esaminare analiticamente i tanti e innovativi contributi. Vorremmo perciò, a questo punto, aggiungere anche qualche nostra suggestione che proprio il volume ci induce.

Dante e la sua *Commedia*, fin da quando egli era in vita, sono soggetti ad una sorta di “infinita esegesi”. Come capita ai classici grandissimi e ai testi sacri verrebbe da dire. E la *Commedia* è, a suo modo, un testo “sacro”. Lo si è visto appunto anche lungo il 2021, l’anno centenario della sua morte. Impresa ardua dar conto delle iniziative, congressi, seminari, cicli di lezioni, performances, libri e saggi e mostre dedicati all’evento in tutto il mondo e in Italia in particolare: è allora ancora possibile parlare di Dante, anche oltre un anno così intenso? È possibile certamente se solo lo si affronti tentando qualche nesso, qualche “varco” che dischiuda le vie che Dante ci ha aperto prima ancora di capire con quali vie noi arriviamo a Dante e come gli scrittori che abbiamo citato appunto fanno suggerirci. Una è certamente clamorosa: Dante opera ai confini estremi tra l’epoca medievale e l’inizio (cui lui stesso negli ultimi tempi della sua vita dà l’avvio) di una nuova stagione, che noi siamo abituati a chiamare umanistica e rinascimentale. Ma la lunghissima età che l’ha preceduto, il Medioevo, è imprescindibile per capirne le radici.

Il Medioevo ci intriga del resto oggi in modo capillare: siamo come rapiti da quell'epoca, quasi più dei romantici, e non solo leggiamo saggi storici ponderosi sul Medioevo ma soprattutto notiamo che la cultura pop se ne è impossessata senza limiti. Basta un elenco sommario: serie televisive, saghe filmiche, romanzi storici (col formidabile archetipo de *Il nome della rosa* di Umberto Eco nel 1980), sagre di paese, festival medievali, evocazioni di battaglie e cerimonie, rilancio di miti *evergreen* a cominciare dai cavalieri della Tavola Rotonda, di Artù, Merlino, Ginevra e Lancillotto con le loro avventure e passioni per passare alla cavalleria, alle Crociate, a Carlo Magno, agli ordini religiosi, a monumenti e cattedrali e l'elenco sarebbe sterminato. Di quella lunghissima e oggi così popolare stagione Dante ci offre molte chiavi per comprenderne i tratti ma è in quell'epoca che troviamo radici formidabili per avvicinarci a Dante, al *My Way* della sua tormentata vita. Certo Dante, proprio in quanto erede di un millennio di cultura medievale, ci appare ed è soprattutto studiato come poeta rivoluzionario, teologo, profeta, allegorista, scienziato, filosofo, politico, persino ideologo, polemista e via discorrendo. Non sempre si mette in luce però un dato eclatante che già avevamo sottolineato: prima di tutto Dante è un grandissimo narratore! Crea infatti per certi versi, con la *Vita nova*, la prima autobiografia dell'Occidente moderno dando vita a un genere che conoscerà un successo quasi ininterrotto fino ai nostri giorni e con la *Commedia* mette in campo una narrazione "totale" senza eguali né allora né oggi (l'unica che le accosterei, come già fece Gianfranco Contini, nel senso appunto di narrazione "totale", è la *Recherche* di Proust, paragone ripreso nel nostro volume da Alessandro Piperno). Proprio nei nostri tempi, così intrisi di generi narrativi ovunque pervasivi, Dante "narratore" ci balza innanzi con una forza inedita e dirompente (e lo abbiamo visto proprio nel libro qui recensito). Occorre perciò indagare, fra le altre cose, proprio le linfe, le fonti esplicite e implicite di cui si è nutrito il Dante narratore, specialmente le suggestioni medievali talora meno esplorate rispetto alle notissime fonti classiche (*in primis* Virgilio, Lucano, Stazio e Ovidio). Le sorprese non sarebbero poche: non dimentichiamo che Dante stesso, pur consapevolmente orientato a fornirci un poema allegorico e "sacro" (le sue fonti privilegiate restano ovviamente sempre i racconti del Vecchio e Nuovo Testamento), ci ricorda che il primo livello di lettura che dobbiamo operare nell'accostarci al suo poema, è innanzitutto quello "letterale" ovvero del testo narrativo così come ci si presenta, lasciandoci andare, per dirla con Roland Barthes, al "piacere" del testo in quanto tale per poi, in un secondo tempo, andare oltre la sua lettera e ritrovare così i vari strati allegorici ed escatologici che vi sono connessi. Se Dante allora racconta la Storia e le storie ecco balzarci innanzi la sua consuetudine con narrazioni cronachistiche e storiografiche classiche e medievali da cui apprende consumate tecniche narrative: vite di Santi, di Sovrani e di eroi (il glorioso genere biografico da cui lui trarrà ispirazione per narrare anche la sua stessa autobiografia esemplare, appunto la *Vita nova*) ma anche cronache che ebbe modo di consultare, ad esempio, nel soggiorno veronese e spesso incentrate sulle vicende di Ezzelino e degli altri signori dell'area veneta/padana. Quei testi furono fondamentali (e tra le fonti di Dante meno indagate oggi) per la sua formazione di narratore. Ma faremmo un torto a Dante se non citassimo anche il sicuro apprendistato (non studiato sempre con la dovuta

attenzione) che egli condusse non solo sul terreno della storiografia ma anche su quello della narrativa medievale d'ordine guerresco, cavalleresco, avventuroso e fantastico così ampiamente diffusa in tutta Europa fin dall'XI-XII secolo e che ancora oggi presiede a tratti non secondari del nostro immaginario: parliamo ovviamente soprattutto del ciclo dei poemi arturiani di circolazione quasi "popolare" anche al tempo di Dante e che egli mostra di conoscere con assoluta "naturalità" (le citazioni ad esempio esplicite di Merlino nel famoso sonetto "Guido, i' vorrei..." o del bacio fra Ginevra e Lancillotto nel canto forse più famoso della Commedia, il quinto dell'Inferno con Paolo e Francesca). Fu grandissima l'influenza di queste narrazioni e dei loro protagonisti per il Dante narratore: stupisce anzi che non proliferino monografie sul Dante "arturiano". Dante infatti è Merlino per certi aspetti (rimando per molte mie considerazioni e per tutta la bibliografia connessa a Anselmi, G.M. 2022. *Dante, il Medioevo e il nostro tempo*. Bologna: Pàtron); così come certe figure eroiche laiche e religiose della Commedia caratterizzate da forza e "dismisura" (ed educate alle regole cavalleresche), e nell'ardore di sconfiggere le ingiustizie, non possono che essere ricondotte all'archetipo fondativo rappresentato dal popolarissimo Lancillotto. E la stessa "magnanimità", dote così cara a Dante e celebrata dal Limbo fino appunto agli spiriti "eroici" e santi del Paradiso (e su cui scrisse pagine fondamentali Fiorenzo Forti) era proverbialmente la dote precipua di Re Artù (che è accostato a questa dote ancora con forza nel *The Faerie Queene* di Spenser in pieno Rinascimento inglese). E ancora: la malia dello sguardo femminile che volge quasi alla "magia" incantatrice è fortemente in debito con figure come Morgana o come la Dama del Lago. Ma tutto l'universo della "magia bianca" di cui si nutre il Dante "scienziato e naturalista" in opposizione alla "magia nera" e alla negromanzia (di cui pure fu accusato ed ebbe fama) è intriso dell'eco delle infinite e mirabolanti vicende magiche e fantastiche dei poemi arturiani e dei suoi protagonisti, in particolare Merlino e Morgana. Fra i quali le donne (Sovrane, Dame e damigelle, Maghe, Fate) svolgevano un ruolo decisivo negli snodi della narrazione. Non si dimentichi, ed è solo uno dei tanti esempi, che è Ginevra, nei poemi arturiani più noti, dopo un lungo "interrogatorio" rivelatore a baciare, sospinta dal cavaliere Galeotto, per prima sulla bocca uno spaesato e timido Lancillotto diradando il suo imbarazzo di innamorato quasi paralizzato di fronte all'amata (e cavaliere per di più al servizio di Artù, sposo di Ginevra). E in un gioco di specchi funambolico e vertiginoso, da supremo narratore in gara col modello arturiano, Dante, rendendo immortale il momento decisivo del primo bacio sulla bocca fra amanti, inverte i ruoli nel quinto dell'Inferno: la donna, Francesca, è dominante come Ginevra (è lei, indiscussa protagonista, a narrare la storia d'amore, Paolo non parla) ma è Paolo che per primo ha il coraggio "tremante" di baciarla nel racconto che ce ne dà Francesca. Meravigliosa e spiazzante riscrittura di uno dei momenti più noti e popolari della cultura cortigiana medievale e del suo immaginario amoroso. Beatrice e le donne dantesche e stilnovistiche hanno diversa consistenza e si configurano con una esplicita caratura filosofica e cristiana ma l'immaginario arturiano ha consegnato a Dante e ai suoi sodali una centralità di "femminile totale" indiscutibile e straordinaria. Solo da questi pochi accenni appare evidente come ci sia ancora molto da esplorare nella ineguagliabile

partitura narrativa della Commedia e come sia imprescindibile appunto, per frequentarne nuovi sentieri, il contributo degli scrittori del nostro tempo. Del resto, la Commedia è innanzitutto una grandiosa narrazione di un viaggio ultraterreno e delle sue plaghe “inesplorate”, di un Narratore (il famoso “Dante Personaggio” distinto dal “Dante Autore”) alle prese con ogni sorta di incontro e di avventura (dalle più terribili alle più sublimi), di personaggi e vicende che hanno ben poco da invidiare alle narrazioni classiche e medievali che siano materiate di realismo come di mirabolante fantastico. Questo vuol dire, in definitiva, “ritrovare” con piacere la “lettera” del testo dantesco e gustarla come una immensa e ineguagliata narrazione “totale” (altri direbbero “opera mondo”). Ed è proprio questa caratura dell’opera dantesca, una preziosa peculiarità, che ne ha soprattutto propiziato la immensa ricezione anche popolare specialmente dall’epoca romantica in poi e oggi addirittura in modo dirompente in tutta la vasta gamma delle “narrazioni” e dell’immaginario (dai romanzi, come si diceva, ai film alle serie televisive ai *graphic novel*, a tutto l’universo narrativo digitale e artistico/seriale oggi dominante). Tutto ciò per altro ha un luogo e un tempo ben precisi di inizio: parliamo della grande stagione romantica inglese da fine Settecento in avanti poi confluita nella cultura americana stessa dell’Ottocento. Difficile indicare, tra i grandissimi inglesi poeti e narratori romantici, tutti quelli che non solo si cimentarono su Dante ma esplicitamente ne fecero uno dei corifei primi della loro poetica: come non pensare a Shelley e alle sue liriche di afflato profetico ed allegorico e addirittura sovente in ripresa metrica della terza rima dantesca; o al Frankenstein di Mary Shelley, in bilico tra la sfida titanica alle Colonne d’Ercole dell’umano violate dall’Ulisse dantesco come dal Dott. Frankenstein e le desolate plaghe finali del ghiaccio artico in esplicita ripresa della Caina ghiacciata e feroce di Ugolino, anch’essa in posizione conclusiva, nell’Inferno. Ma come poi ancora non pensare a Byron che tanto disdegnava Petrarca quanto adorava Dante (e lo testimoniò con la sua famosa Profezia di Dante concepita proprio a Ravenna); o al visionario William Blake che illustrò con magnifici tratti pittorici la Commedia e si legò alla potenza immaginativa del nostro poeta; e come dimenticare Coleridge o le tante poetesse romantiche inglesi o la divina Dickinson negli USA avvinti dal Dante stilnovista e “innamorato” purissimo. Tra i narratori/ le narratrici poi l’elenco è interminabile: da Jane Austen a Joyce il riferimento a Dante è continuo e prorompente appare il suo influsso su interi generi narrativi anglosassoni, in particolare come è ovvio nel genere “gotico” e “nero” (persino il Dickens di certi personaggi malvagi e cinici), straripante nella letteratura anglosassone anche popolare. La letteratura romantica inglese forgiò così la ricezione definitiva di Dante in Europa: Hugo, Balzac, Dumas, Manzoni, Dorè (l’illustratore ancora oggi più celebre della Commedia), i tragici tedeschi con il Faust goethiano, e l’elenco sarebbe infinito, sono strettamente connessi col Dante rinato in modo originalissimo e impetuoso nella cultura anglosassone. Non a caso le grandi narrazioni contemporanee globali affidate a molti filoni cinematografici come a moltissime serie televisive sono intrise del Dante “infernale” (come dicevamo all’inizio) e “narratore” ineguagliabile proprio in virtù di questa sua straordinaria ricezione nel grande Romanticismo inglese e americano che ha forgiato del resto la struttura portante

della stessa narrativa moderna e contemporanea (specie in crescendo nel secondo Novecento fino ad oggi e fino al mondo digitale della “realtà aumentata” e virtuale). In definitiva allora l’impasto vertiginoso che nella *Commedia* Dante sa creare tra narrazione letterale e infernale, conoscenze storiche, naturalistiche e matematiche e ricchezza senza fine di rimandi allegorici ai significati “sottotraccia” di natura amorosa, filosofica, teologica, religiosa, finalistica, “sacra” appunto, resta la chiave per comprendere l’influenza che il grande poema dantesco ha finito per esercitare non solo sulle migliori prove letterarie ed artistiche del nostro mondo ma anche sul nostro approccio alla comprensione stessa del mondo; laddove, oggi più che mai, i saperi della letteratura risultano fondativi (come Dante ben aveva squadernato nel poema) della “conoscenza” e del “discernimento” non meno di altri saperi filosofici, scientifici, religiosi. Come sostiene il grande pittore/artista tedesco contemporaneo Anselm Kiefer, in definitiva “l’arte e la poesia sono le sole cose vere. Il resto è illusione”.



*CoSMo*  
*Comparative Studies*  
*in Modernism*

<https://www.ojs.unito.it/index.php/COSMO/>



<http://centroartidellamodernita.it/>

**SOCI FONDATORI**

Donatella Badin, Anna Battaglia, Giovanni Bottioli, Nadia Caprioglio, Melita Cataldi,  
Giorgio Cerruti, Anna Chiarloni, Daniela Deagostini, Winifred Farrant, Giuliana Ferreccio,  
Maria Teresa Giaveri, Roberto Gilodi, Fedora Giordano, Stefano Giovannuzzi, Chiara  
Lombardi, Franco Marengo, Pier Giuseppe Monateri, Riccardo Morello, Chiara Sandrin,  
Giulio Schiavoni, Carla Vaglio, Federico Vercellone, Barbara Zandrino

